THE HOLLY HEDGE

TEMPLE BAILEY



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THE HOLLY HEDGE

AND

OTHER CHRISTMAS STORIES



By Temple Bailey

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A HUSH FELL OVER THE WOOD





THE HOLLY HEDGE

AND OTHER CHRISTMAS STORIES

BY

TEMPLE BAILEY



Frontispiece by Nat Little

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The Holly Hedge

PRINTED AND BOUND BY THE
PLIMPTON PRESS · NORWOOD · MASS

MADE IN THE U·S·A

CONTENTS

THE CANDLE IN THE FOREST

THE TRANQUIL BEASTS

THREE WHO STOLE AT CHRISTMAS TIME

THE RED CANDLE

THE HOLLY HEDGE

THE CANDLE IN THE FOREST



THE CANDLE IN THE FOREST



THE SMALL GIRL'S mother was saying, "The onions will be silver, and the carrots will be gold—"

"And the potatoes will be ivory," said the Small Girl, and they laughed together.

The Small Girl's mother had a big white bowl in her lap and she was cutting up vegetables. The onions were the hardest, because one cried a little over them.

"But our tears will be pearls," said the Small Girl's mother, and they laughed at that and dried their eyes, and found the carrots much easier, and the potatoes the easiest of all.

Then the Next-Door-Neighbor came in and said, "What are you doing?"

"We are making a beefsteak pie for our Christmas dinner," said the Small Girl's mother.

"And the onions are silver, and the carrots gold, and the potatoes ivory," said the Small Girl.

"I am sure I don't know what you are talking about," said the Next-Door-Neighbor. "We are

going to have turkey for Christmas, and oysters and cranberries and celery."

The Small Girl laughed and clapped her hands. "But we are going to have a Christmas pie — and the onions are silver and the carrots gold — "

"You said that once," said the Next-Door-Neighbor, "and I should think you'd know they weren't anything of the kind."

"But they *are*," said the Small Girl, all shining eyes and rosy cheeks.

"Run along, darling," said the Small Girl's mother, "and find poor Pussy Purr-up. He's out in the cold. And you can put on your red sweater and red cap."

So the Small Girl hopped away like a happy robin, and the Next-Door-Neighbor said,

"She is old enough to know that onions aren't silver."

"But they are," said the Small Girl's mother, "and the carrots are gold, and the potatoes are — "

The Next-Door-Neighbor's face was flaming. "If you say that again, I'll scream. It sounds silly to me."

"But it isn't in the least silly," said the Small Girl's mother, and her eyes were as blue as sapphires and as clear as the sea; "it is sensible. When people are poor, they have to make the most of little things. And we'll have only a pound of steak in our pie, but the onions will be silver — "

The lips of the Next-Door-Neighbor were folded in a thin line. "If you had acted like a sensible creature, I shouldn't have asked you for the rent."

The Small Girl's mother was silent for a moment, then she said: "I am sorry — it ought to be sensible to make the best of things."

"Well," said the Next-Door-Neighbor, sitting down in a chair with a very stiff back, "a beefsteak pie is a beefsteak pie. And I wouldn't teach a child to call it anything else."

"I haven't taught her to call it anything else. I was only trying to make her feel that it was something fine and splendid for Christmas day, so I said that the onions were silver — "

"Don't say that again," snapped the Next-Door-Neighbor, "and I want the rent as soon as possible."

With that, she flung up her head and marched out of the front door, and it slammed behind her and made wild echoes in the little house.

And the Small Girl's mother stood there alone in the middle of the floor, and her eyes were like the sea in a storm.

But presently the door opened, and the Small Girl, looking like a red-breast robin, hopped in, and after her came a great black cat with his tail in the air, and he said "Purr-up," which gave him his name.

And the Small Girl said out of the things she had

been thinking, "Mother, why don't we have turkey?"

The clear look came back into the eyes of the Small Girl's mother, and she said, "Because we are content."

And the Small Girl said, "What is 'content'?"

And her mother said: "It is making the best of what God gives us. And our best for Christmas day, my darling, is a beefsteak pie."

So she kissed the Small Girl, and they finished peeling the vegetables, and then they put them with the pound of steak to simmer on the back of the stove.

After that, the Small Girl had her supper of bread and milk, and Pussy Purr-up had milk in a saucer on the hearth, and the Small Girl climbed up in her mother's lap and said:

"Tell me a story."

But the Small Girl's mother said, "Won't it be nicer to talk about Christmas presents?"

And the Small Girl sat up and said, "Let's."

And the mother said, "Let's tell each other what we'd rather have in the whole wide world — "

"Oh, let's," said the Small Girl. "And I'll tell you first that I want a doll — and I want it to have a pink dress — and I want it to have eyes that open and shut — and I want it to have shoes and stockings — and I want it to have curly hair — "

She had to stop, because she didn't have any

breath left in her body, and when she got her breath back, she said, "Now, what do you want Mother — more than anything else in the whole wide world?"

"Well," said her mother, "I want a chocolate mouse."

"Oh," said the Small Girl, scornfully, "I shouldn't think you'd want that."

"Why not?"

"Because a chocolate mouse — why, a chocolate mouse isn't anything."

"Oh, yes, it is," said the Small Girl's mother. "A chocolate mouse is Dickory Dock, and Pussy-Cat-Pussy-Cat-Where-Have-You-Been — and it's Three-Blind-Mice — and it's A-Frog-He-Would-a-Wooing-Go — and it's — "

The Small Girl's eyes were dancing. "Oh, tell me about it — "

And her mother said: "Well, the mouse in Dickory-Dock ran *up* the clock, and the mouse in Pussy-Cat-Pussy-Cat was frightened *under* a chair, and the mice in Three-Blind-Mice ran *after* the farmer's wife, and the mouse in A-Frog He-Would-a-Wooing-Go went *down* the throat of the crow — "

And the Small Girl said, "Could a chocolate mouse do all that?"

"Well," said the Small Girl's mother, "we could put him *on* the clock, and *under* a chair,

and cut his tail *off* with a carving knife, and at the very last we could eat him *up* like a crow."

The Small Girl shivered deliciously. "And he wouldn't be a real mouse?"

"No, just a chocolate one, with cream inside."

"Do you think I'll get one for Christmas?"

"I'm not sure."

"Would he be nicer than a doll?"

The Small Girl's mother hesitated, then told the truth. "My darling — Mother saved up the money for a doll, but the Next-Door-Neighbor wants the rent."

"Hasn't Daddy any more money?"

"Poor Daddy has been sick so long."

"But he's well now."

"I know. But he has to pay money for doctors, and money for medicine, and money for your red sweater, and money for milk for Pussy-Purr-up, and money for our beefsteak pie."

"The Boy-Next-Door says we're poor, Mother."

"We are rich, my darling. We have love, and each other, and Pussy-Purr-up — "

"His mother won't let him have a cat," said the Small Girl, with her mind still on the Boy-Next-Door, "But he's going to have a radio."

"Would you rather have a radio than Pussy-Purr-up?"

The Small Girl gave a crow of derision. "I'd

rather have Pussy Purr-up than anything else in the whole wide world."

At that, the great cat, who had been sitting on the hearth with his paws tucked under him and his eyes like moons, stretched out his satin-shining length, and jumped up on the arm of the chair beside the Small Girl and her mother, and began to sing a song that was like a mill-wheel away off. He purred so long and so loud that at last the Small Girl grew drowsy.

"Tell me some more about the chocolate mouse," she said, and nodded, and slept.

The Small Girl's mother carried her into another room, put her to bed, and came back to the kitchen — and it was full of shadows.

But she did not let herself sit among them. She wrapped herself in a great cape and went out into the cold dusk, with a sweep of wind; heavy clouds overhead; and a band of dull orange showing back of the trees, where the sun had burned down.

She went straight from her little house to the big house of the Next-Door-Neighbor and rang the bell at the back entrance. A maid let her into the kitchen, and there was the Next-Door-Neighbor,

and the two women who worked for her, and a Daughter-in-Law who had come to spend Christmas. The great range was glowing, and things were simmering, and things were stewing, and things were steaming, and things were baking, and things were boiling, and things were broiling, and there was a fragrance of a thousand delicious dishes in the air.

And the Next-Door-Neighbor said: "We are trying to get as much done as possible tonight. We are having twelve people for Christmas dinner tomorrow."

And the Daughter-in-Law, who was all dressed up and had an apron tied about her, said in a sharp voice, "I can't see why you don't let your maids work for you."

And the Next-Door-Neighbor said: "I have always worked. There is no excuse for laziness."

And the Daughter-in-Law said: "I'm not lazy, if that's what you mean. And we'll never have any dinner if I have to cook it," and away she went out of the kitchen with tears of rage in her eyes.

And the Next-Door-Neighbor said, "If she hadn't gone when she did, I should have told her to go," and there was rage in her eyes but no tears.

She took her hands out of the pan of bread-crumbs and sage, which she was mixing for the stuffing, and said to the Small Girl's mother:

"Did you come to pay the rent?"

The Small Girl's mother handed her the money, and the Next-Door-Neighbor went upstairs to write a receipt. Nobody asked the Small Girl's mother to sit down, so she stood in the middle of the floor, and sniffed the entrancing fragrances, and looked at the mountain of food which would have served her small family for a month.

While she waited, the Boy-Next-Door came in and he said, "Are you the Small Girl's mother?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to have a tree?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to see mine?"

"It would be wonderful."

So he led her down a long passage to a great room, and there was a tree which touched the ceiling, and on the very top branches and on all the other branches were myriads of little lights which shone like stars and there were gold balls and silver ones, and gold bells and silver ones, and red and blue and green bells — and under the tree and on it were toys for boys and toys for girls, and one of the toys was a doll in a pink dress!

At that the heart of the Small Girl's mother tightened, and she was glad she wasn't a thief or she would have snatched at the pink doll when the boy wasn't looking and hidden it under her cape and run away with it!

The Boy-Next-Door was saying: "It's the finest tree anybody has around here. But Dad and Mother don't know that I've seen it."

"Oh, don't they?" said the Small Girl's mother.

"No," said the Boy-Next-Door, with a wide grin, "and it's fun to fool 'em."

"Is it?" said the Small Girl's mother. "Now, do you know, I should think the very nicest thing in the whole wide world would be *not* to have seen the tree."

The Boy-Next-Door stared and said, "Why?"

"Because," said the Small Girl's mother, "the nicest thing in the world would be to have somebody tie a handkerchief around your eyes, as tight as tight, and then to have somebody take your hand and lead you in and out and in and out and in and out, until you didn't know where you were, and then to have them untie the handkerchief — and there would be the tree — all shining and splendid —"

She stopped, but her singing voice seemed to echo and re-echo in the great room.

The boy's staring eyes had a new look in them. "Did anybody ever tie a handkerchief over your eyes?"

"Oh, yes —"

"And lead you in and out, and in and out?"

"Yes."

"Well, nobody does things like that in our house. They think it's silly."

The Small Girl's mother laughed and her laugh tinkled like a bell. "Do you think it is silly?"

He was eager. "No, I don't."

She held out her hand to him. "Will you come and see our tree?"

"Tonight?"

"No, tomorrow morning — early."

"Before breakfast?"

She nodded.

"Gee, I'd like it."

So that was a bargain, with a quick squeeze of their hands on it. And the Small Girl's mother went back to the kitchen, and the Next-Door-Neighbor came down with the receipt, and the Small Girl's mother went out of the back door and found that orange band which had burned on the horizon was gone, and that there was just the wind and the sighing of the trees.

Two men passed her on the brick walk which led to the house, and one of the men was saying:

"If you'd only be fair to me, father."

And the other man said, "All you want of me is money."

"You taught me that, father."

"Blame it on me — "

"You are to blame. You and mother — did you ever show me the finer things?"

Their angry voices seemed to beat against the noise of the wind and the sighing trees, so that the

Small Girl's mother shivered and drew her cape around her, and ran on as fast as she could to her little house.

There were all the shadows to meet her, but she did not sit among them. She made coffee and a dish of milk toast, and set the toast in the oven to keep hot, and then she stood at the window watching. At last she saw through the darkness what looked like a star low down, and she knew that the star was a lantern, and she ran and opened the door wide.

And the young husband set the lantern down on the threshold, and took her in his arms, and said, "The sight of you is more than food and drink."

When he said that, she knew he had had a hard day, but her heart leaped, because she knew that what he had said of her was true.

Then they went into the house together, and she set the food before him. And that he might forget his hard day, she told him of her own. And when she came to the part about the Next-Door-Neighbor and the rent, she said,

"I am telling you this because it has a happy ending."

And he put his hands over hers and said, "Everything with you has a happy ending."

"Well, *this* is a happy ending," said the Small Girl's mother, with all the sapphire in her eyes emphasizing it. "Because when I went over to pay

the rent I was feeling how poor we were, and wishing that I had a pink doll for baby, and books for you, and — and — and a magic carpet to carry us away from work and worry. And then I went into the kitchen of the big house, and there was everything delicious and delectable, and then I went into the parlor and saw the tree — with everything hanging on it that was glittering and gorgeous — and then I came home," her breath was quick and her lips smiling, " I came home — and I was glad I lived in my little house."

" What made you glad, dearest? "

" Oh, love is here; and hate is there, and a boy's deceit, and a man's injustice. They were saying sharp things to each other — and — and — their dinner will be a — stalled ox. And in my little house is the faith of a child in the goodness of God and the bravery of a man who fought for his country — "

She was in his arms now.

" And the blessing of a woman who has never known defeat." His voice broke on the words.

In that moment it seemed as if the wind stopped blowing and as if the trees stopped sighing and as if there was the sound of a heavenly host singing —



The Small Girl's mother and the Small Girl's father sat up very late that night. They popped a great bowlful of crisp snowy corn and made it into balls. They boiled sugar and molasses and cracked nuts and made candy of them. They cut funny little Christmas fairies out of paper and painted their jackets bright red, with round silver buttons of the tinfoil that came on a cream cheese. And then they put the balls and the candy and the painted fairies and a long red candle in a big basket and set it away. And the Small Girl's mother brought out the chocolate mouse.

"We will put this on the clock," she said, "where her eyes will rest on it the first thing in the morning."

So they put it there and it seemed as natural as life, so that Pussy Purr-up positively licked his chops and sat in front of the clock as if to keep his eye on the chocolate mouse.

And the Small Girl's mother said, "She was lovely about giving up the doll, and she will love the tree."

"We'll have to get up very early," said the Small Girl's father.

"And you'll have to run ahead and light the candle."

Well, they got up before the dawn the next morning, and so did the Boy-Next-Door. He was there on the step, waiting, blowing his hands and

beating them quite like the poor little boys in a Christmas story, who haven't any mittens.

But he wasn't a poor little boy, and he had so many pairs of fur-trimmed gloves that he didn't know what to do with them, but he had left the house in such a hurry that he had forgotten to put them on.

So there he stood on the front step of the little house, blowing on his hands and beating them. And it was dark, with a sort of pale shine in the heavens, which didn't seem to come from the stars or to herald the dawn; it was just a mystical silver glow that set the boy's heart to beating.

He had never been out alone like this. He had always stayed in his warm bed until somebody called him, and then he had waited until they called again, and then he had dressed and gone down to breakfast, where his father scolded because he was late, and his mother scolded because he ate too fast. But this day had begun with adventure, and for the first time, under that silver sky, he felt the thrill of it.

Then suddenly some one came around the corner — some one tall and thin, with a cap on his head and an empty basket in his hands.

"Hello," he said, "A Merry Christmas."

It was the Small Girl's father, and he put the key in the lock, and went in, and turned on a light, and there was the table set for four.

And the Small Girl's father said: "You see we have set a place for you. We must eat something before we go out."

And the Boy said: "Are we going out? I came to see the tree."

"We are going out to see the tree."

Before the Boy-Next-Door could ask any questions, the Small Girl's mother appeared with her finger on her lips and said: "Sh-sh," and then she began to recite in a hushed voice,

"Hickory-Dickory-Dock — "

Then there was a little cry and the sound of dancing feet and the Small Girl in a red dressing-gown came flying in.

"Oh, mother, the mouse is *on* the clock. The mouse is *on* the clock."

Well, it seemed to the Boy-Next-Door that he had never seen anything so exciting as the things that followed. The chocolate mouse went *up* the clock and *under* the chair — and would have had its tail cut *off* except that the Small Girl begged to save it.

"I want to keep it as it is, mother."

And playing this game as if it were the most important thing in the whole wide world were the Small Girl's mother and the Small Girl's father, all laughing and flushed, and chanting the quaint old words to the quaint old music.

The Boy-Next-Door held his breath for fear he

would wake up from this entrancing dream and find himself in his own big house, alone in his puffy bed, or eating breakfast with his stodgy parents who never had played with him in his life. He found himself laughing too, and flushed and happy, and trying to sing in his funny boy's voice,

"Heigh-o, says Anthony Rowley!"

The Small Girl absolutely refused to eat the mouse. "He's my darling Christmas mouse, Mother."

So her mother said, "Well, I'll put him on the clock again, where Pussy Purr-up can't get him while we are out."

"Oh, are we going out?" said the Small Girl, round-eyed.

"Yes."

"Where are we going?"

"To find Christmas."

That was all the Small Girl's mother would tell. So they had breakfast, and everything tasted perfectly delicious to the Boy-Next-Door. But first they bowed their heads, and the Small Girl's father said:

"Dear Christ-Child, on this Christmas morning, bless these children, and help us all to keep our hearts young and full of love for Thee."

The Boy-Next-Door, when he lifted his head, had a funny feeling as if he wanted to cry, and yet it was a lovely feeling, all warm and comfortable.

For breakfast they each had a great baked apple, and great slices of sweet bread and butter, and great glasses of milk, and as soon as they had finished, away they went, out of the door and down into the wood back of the house, and when they were deep in the wood, the Small Girl's father took out of his pocket a little flute and began to play, and he played thin piping tunes that went flittering around among the trees, and the Small Girl hummed the tunes, and her mother hummed the tunes until it sounded like singing bees, and their feet fairly danced, and the boy found himself humming and dancing with them.

Then suddenly the piping ceased, and a hush fell over the wood. It was so still that they could almost hear each other breathe — so still that when a light flamed suddenly in that open space it burned without a flicker.

The light came from a red candle that was set in the top of a small living tree. It was the only light on the tree, but it showed the snowy balls, and the small red fairies whose coats had silver buttons.

"It's our tree, my darling," he heard the Small Girl's mother saying.

Suddenly it seemed to the boy that his heart would burst in his breast. He wanted some one to speak to him like that. The Small Girl sat high on her father's shoulder, and her father held her

mother's hand. It was like a chain of gold, their holding hands like that and loving each other —

The boy reached out and touched the woman's hand. She looked down at him and drew him close. He felt warmed and comforted. The red candle burning there in the darkness was like some sacred fire of friendship. He wished that it would never go out, that he might stand there watching it, with his small cold hand in the clasp of the Small Girl's mother.



It was late when the Boy-Next-Door got back to his own house. But he had not been missed. Everybody was up, and everybody was angry. The Daughter-in-Law had declared the night before that she would not stay another day beneath that roof, and off she had gone with her young husband, and her little girl, who was to have had the pink doll on the tree.

"And good riddance," said the Next-Door-Neighbor.

But she ate no breakfast, and she went out to the kitchen and worked with her maids to get the dinner ready, and there were covers laid for nine instead of twelve.

And the Next-Door-Neighbor kept saying,

"Good riddance — good riddance," and not once did she say, "A Merry Christmas."

But the Boy-Next-Door held something in his heart that was warm and glowing like the candle in the forest, and so he came to his mother and said,

"May I have the pink doll?"

She spoke frowningly. "What does a boy want of a doll?"

"I'd like to give it to the little girl next door."

"Do you think I buy dolls to give away in charity?"

"Well, they gave me a Christmas present."

"What did they give you?"

His opened his hand and showed a little flute tied with a gay red ribbon. He lifted it to his lips and blew on it, a thin piping tune —

"Oh, that," said the mother, scornfully, "why, that's nothing but a reed from the pond!"

But the boy knew that it was more than that. It was a magic pipe that made you dance, and made your heart warm and happy.

So he said again, "I'd like to give her the doll," and he reached out his little hand and touched his mother's — and his eyes were wistful.

His mother's own eyes softened — she had lost one son that day — and she said, "Oh, well, do as you please," and went back to the kitchen.

The Boy-Next-Door ran into the great room and

took the doll from the tree, and wrapped her in paper, and flew out of the door and down the brick walk and straight into the little house.

When the door was opened, he saw that his friends were just sitting down to dinner — and there was the beefsteak pie all brown and piping hot, with a wreath of holly, and the Small Girl was saying,

" And the onions were silver, and the carrots gold — "

The Boy-Next-Door went up to the Small Girl and said,

" I've brought you a present."

With his eyes all lighted up, he took off the paper in which it was wrapped, and there was the doll, in rosy frills, with eyes that opened and shut and shoes and stockings and curly hair that was bobbed and beautiful.

And the Small Girl, in a whirlwind of happiness, said, " Is it really *my* doll? "

And the Boy-Next-Door felt very shy and happy, and he said, " Yes."

And the Small Girl's mother said, " It was a beautiful thing to do," and she bent and kissed him.

Again that bursting feeling came into the boy's heart, and he lifted his face to hers and said, " May I come sometimes and be your boy? "

And she said, " Yes."

And when at last he went away, she stood in the door and watched him, such a little lad, who knew so little of loving. And because she knew so much of love, her eyes filled to overflowing.

But presently she wiped the tears away and went back to the table. And she smiled at the Small Girl and at the Small Girl's father.

"And the potatoes were ivory," she said. "Oh, who would ask for turkey, when they can have a pie like this?"



THE TRANQUIL BEASTS



THE TRANQUIL BEASTS

CHRISTMAS was a week away. And everything was ready.

"Isn't it joyful, Peter," said Peter's mother.

"Yes," Peter's voice lacked enthusiasm, "and now let's talk."

"But, my darling, I haven't time. I must telephone to Mrs. Maddox about the old ladies from the home who are going to dine with us Christmas Day, and I must talk over my menus with Martha. And daddy will be here before we know it."

"Well," said Peter, resignedly, and got out his Noah's Ark, and set the animals all in a row on the rug in front of the fire.

The rug was a velvety, deep-piled thing, with honey-colored lights. Peter liked to think of it as The Sands of the Desert. When the animals walked on it, two by two, the camels and the leopards and the lions, the effect was tremendous. Peter was, of course, too old for a Noah's Ark.

He was seven and he went to school. But he loved his Noah's Ark in the same way that he loved the great log on the fire, and the sound of the wind booming about the high and handsome apartment house in which he lived; and in the same way that he liked the shine of the candles in the dining-room, and the smell of the roast meat for dinner.

His mother sat at the telephone and told Mrs. Maddox things in the same words that she had told them to Peter.

"Isn't it joyful, Maude? I have everything ready except wrapping the parcels, and Peter is going to help me with that on Saturday. We are tying them with blue, sprinkled with silver stars. We are so tired of red. And the blue gives a hint of the Madonna idea. Yes? Oh, there will be ten of us — we three, and the two old ladies from the home, and Big Peter's brother Robert, and his wife and three boys. No, we are not going to have a tree."

Peter pricked up his ears. His mother hadn't told him that. No tree. No thick spicy fragrance of pine, no spiny branches, that grew brittle as the days went on and strewed the waxed floor with needles like the ground in the forest.

" Mother," he said, as she hung up the receiver, " why didn't you tell me that there won't be any tree? "

" Oh, did you hear? Well, you've always had a

tree. And I have thought of something new. It's a secret."

"I don't want a secret." Peter's eyes were stormy. "I want a tree."

"But darling. . . ."

Peter knew that tone. His mother's logic would be convincing. They never quarreled. Peter had had it impressed upon him that quarreling wasn't well-bred. His polite protests always ended in acquiescence. He was not in the least afraid of his mother, not physically afraid. But he grew so tired of her eternal rightness. Although he wouldn't have called it that. There never seemed to be any room for your own ideas.

So he dropped the subject, and set three camels out alone on the honey-colored rug. Martha, the cook, had come into the dining-room, which was just beyond the library, and was talking to his mother. There was a second-maid, Lulu, setting the table, and she stopped and listened to his mother's instructions.

"I am making my lists up, Martha, so that you can put in your orders early."

She read the menus, and Peter, traveling with his camels over the sandy desert on a magical quest, was aware of an appetizing succession of foods, from which he mentally picked out his favorites — candied sweet potatoes, and Marie-Louise soup. He liked the name of the soup so much that he had

always eaten it, in spite of its rather complicated flavor. His father had shown him a picture of Marie-Louise.

"If you have any suggestions, Martha, let me know now. The color scheme will be green and white—. I'll order the centerpiece from the florist, Lulu; there'll be mistletoe for the big silver bowl, and tall white candles. And the canapés must be green, Martha, and pistachio ice-cream in Christmas-tree forms. . . ."

The drowsily-listening Peter was aware of the cut-and-driedness of it all. They had turkey every other Sunday in winter, and canapés and ice-cream were no novelties. He didn't know what he wanted. But there was a picture in a book of a pudding all in flames. And his father had read to him about the Cratchits and of how *their* pudding bobbed in the copper. His mother's bright voice stopped. Martha went back to the kitchen, Lulu came into the library and pulled the chain of the lamp. Then she went on to other lights and other duties. Peter lay on the rug and dreamed. The camels loomed large through his half-shut eyes. Three kings were riding them, in turbans and long robes. Then someone said in a hearty way: "Asleep, Peter?"

Peter sat up. "Hello, Daddy. No, I wasn't. I was waiting for you."

"Good boy." Big Peter sat down, and young Peter leaned against his knee.

Big Peter's eyes fell on the three camels on the honey-colored rug. "It's a good thing," he said, "that you started them so soon. They have far to travel."

"Yes, they have," said Peter. His hands stole into his father's. To his mother the three toy camels would have been just three toy camels. To Daddy they were gold and frankincense and myrrh. They sat and talked together until Mother came in. She was all dressed — beautifully — in a gown that looked like a flame.

"Oh, Daddy," she said, with a sort of shining reproach. "Are you here? I thought every minute you'd be coming up. It's so late, and I had an early dinner because of the play."

"Are we going out?" Daddy got up and kissed her.

"I told you this morning — the Russians."

"I remember. Is dinner ready?"

"In fifteen minutes. I was a bit late myself. I have to fit everything in. These are busy days."

IT SEEMED to Peter, weighing it, that his father's days were busy. He looked after people's eyes — a specialist. But he never talked about being in a hurry. "Want to come with me?" he asked Peter, and Peter followed him to the

upper rooms of their spacious apartment, and watched the swift fifteen minutes of sartorial transformation, which began in a quick shower, and ended with a dress coat.

While the shower was in progress, Peter gazed out of the window. "It's snowing," he said, when his father came back, "and the snow is funny where light shines on it."

His father, a fascinating figure in his fat blue bathrobe, and with his hair wet and rumpled, took time to look. "It makes me think of an old melodrama I saw when I was a boy, Peter. There was paper snow, and it came down on the heroine in just one spot — a handful or two — and the rest of the stage was clear — "

Peter adored his father's reminiscences. He wanted to ask more questions about the heroine out in the snow. But his father warned him. "I am in no end of a rush. Save it up, old chap, and we'll talk about it after dinner. It was a corking old play, 'Two Orphans.' "

Peter went downstairs hugging within his heart the thought of that paper storm . . . two orphans . . . and why was one of them out in the cold . . . ?

After dinner: "Tell me about it, Daddy."

And mother asked, "About what?"

"Oh," said Little Peter, "something he saw at a play."

"Darling, he hasn't time. It is late as it is. And the car is waiting."

Big Peter laid his hand on his son's shoulder, "Lucia," he said, "must we go?"

"Of course. We're ready." Then the car was announced, and they went away, and Peter sat by the fire and waited for Lulu, and wished that his father was there to tell him about the orphan in the paper snow.

Big Peter's office had a succession of rooms like the sections of a telescope. You began with the great reception halls, and ended with Big Peter's tiny private office. Only special patients came into that very-end room. Big Peter always opened his morning mail there, and read as much of it as he could before people came to him about their eyes. And it was the morning after he had been to see the Russians in a strange and moving play that Big Peter had a letter from his only brother, Robert. It would be, Robert said, utterly impossible for him and Jean and the boys to come down for Christmas. It was a great disappointment to them all. But that was one of the things which happened now and then to a country practitioner. One of his patients would need him on the twenty-fourth, and he and Jean had talked it over and had wondered if Big Peter and Little Peter and Lucia couldn't come up to the farm for a glorious old-fashioned Christmas Day dinner,

"such as you and I had when we were boys together."

Big Peter drew a long breath. He laid the letter down and looked off into space. Then, presently, his nurse came in to announce his first patient. And Big Peter slipped into his white linen things, and scrubbed up his hands and began his day's work. For eight hours he automatically questioned and examined and advised and gave prescriptions. And every day was just like the day before and the day after, except that on Thursday, Big Peter performed operations at the hospital. And it was not until nearly six o'clock, when he leaned back in his limousine, on his way home, that Big Peter had time to think of his brother Bob's letter. It was snowing again — a new fall on the already whitened streets. There was no wind and the sounds of the city were stilled. The other cars that passed them were like shadow-shapes in the gloom. Big Peter wished that he had Little Peter beside him, wide-eyed — while they talked together of the things that had happened in Big Peter's boyhood.

Big Peter was a successful man. He and his brother Bob had studied medicine together and when their father had died and the money was divided, Bob had decided to go back to the hills and take up his father's practice. Big Peter, then, had thought him foolish. The city promised so much. And it had kept its promise. Big Peter

was famous. And he was not tied to things as Bob was tied. Even now, as he rode safe and warm in his great closed car, Bob might be floundering through great drifts, up there in the hills.

Yet, up there in the hills, life was simpler; perhaps, after all, Bob had the best of it. Big Peter wondered what had happened to his own life — and Lucia's. Lucia was lovely. One couldn't pick a flaw in her. Yet she seemed separated from him by some intangible barrier. And she was separated, too, from Little Peter. It was noticeable how the boy shut her out from his confidences; how he left all the close and intimate things to say to his father when they were alone. And a boy shouldn't. . . . A mother was a mother. Big Peter remembered his own . . . a serene person, who would sit with folded hands and attentive gaze while he poured out his heart to her.

Little Peter had never been to the farm in winter. With his father and mother he had spent two weeks there one summer. Lucia had not liked it. She was city-bred. She had always lived in a perfectly ordered home. Big Peter adored her, but he admitted reluctantly that, at times, her perfections clicked like a busy machine. That night, he and Lucia dined out. Little Peter saw them off. "Don't you like her in that dress, Daddy?"

"Yes. It is your loveliest gown, Lucia."

She laughed a little. "You two . . . You are

alike as peas! I wonder why this gown takes your eye?"

"I know why it takes my eye," said Little Peter, gravely; "it is like a buttercup."

"It is like a whole field of buttercups," said Big Peter.

And Lucia just laughed again, and said, "Gracious, a field of buttercups sounds as big as — hoopskirts — !"

It was late when Lucia and Big Peter came home from their dinner-party, and it was while they sat in the library where the fire had burned down to ashes and an opal heart, that Big Peter said, "I had a letter today from Bob."

"When are they coming?"

"They are not coming, Lucia. Bob has a case which will hold him over the twenty-fifth. They want us to come up for the week-end and eat Christmas dinner with them."

Lucia, in the field-of-buttercups gown, leaned back against the dark leather of her chair and said, "Well, of course, we can't."

"Why not?"

"You can't get away, can you?"

"Yes. McGregor will look after my patients."

She considered that for a moment. "But all of our plans are made. We have so many engagements. It will be impossible to break them."

"I should like to make it possible."

She enumerated patiently. "We have accepted an invitation for the Stacys' dinner, and the Lorings', and Muriel Abbott is giving a dance, and . . ."

He lifted his hand, "Let's cut away from all of them. . . . Little Peter would love it."

"But I have everything planned for Peter, too. A surprise. I have asked a lot of children to come and sing carols; instead of a tree. And Peter will give them presents from a huge Christmas pie."

"Lucia, he won't like that. His tree is everything —"

SHE argued it and he listened, his eyes fixed frowningly on the fire. Usually he let her have her own way. He had, like Little Peter, learned the futility of argument. Lucia could everlastingly prove her point. And she was always so disturbed when he lost his temper. He did not mean to lose it now. He felt that Peter ought to have a tree. He, himself, wanted it. It seemed to bring to him a breath of his own pine woods. He was always sorry when New Year's day came, and the tree had to be taken down. He and Little Peter made a ceremony each year of burning it in the fireplace. "You see, it goes back up the chimney,"

he had told his small son, " and the wind carries it away to the forest."

" And its spirit talks to the other trees? "

" Perhaps. And tells them what it did here."

Peter and his father often talked of spirits. Big Peter did not believe that death was the end of things. " All that is fine and good and brave in us lives forever, Peter." He wanted Little Peter to think of death without fear, and of all that came after it.

And now Lucia was saying, " Jean and Bob are great dears and the boys are darlings. But their house is terribly haphazard."

He brought himself back to her. " Oh, well, of course. If you feel that way about it, we won't think of it." He stood up. " Let's go to bed. I'm dead tired and tomorrow is my day at the hospital."

She, too, stood up. " Perhaps Little Peter can go to the farm in the spring," she said, in her bright voice, " when we haven't so much on here."

" I wasn't thinking entirely of Peter. I was thinking of . . . myself."

" Would you really like it? "

" Like it? Good Lord, yes. Why, it was home to me when I was a little chap . . ." he found it hard to go on.

Her finger-tips caressed the lapel of his coat,

the field-of-buttercups gown was like sunshine against the black.

"We'll go, of course. I'm not so selfish."

He was eager. "Lucia, you'll adore it. You've never seen anything like its charm in winter."

They went upstairs together. His arm around her. And he was half-apologetic. "It is too bad that you'll have to spoil all your plans."

Yet the last apologetic impulse died when, before going to bed, he went in and looked at Little Peter. The child was as warm and rosy as his own pink pajamas. He had crisp bronze curls and the firm set of his chin was like Big Peter's. As the father drew up the covers there was a rustle under his hand. Little Peter had written a note on his very own paper, with a fat gold "P" at the top. Big Peter read it under the lamp.

DEAR SANTA: Please bring me a tree. Mother says I am not to have one. So will you just drop it down the chimbley — there isn't any fire before 7 in the morning.

Yours truly,
PETER BLAKE.

Well, Peter should have his tree. They would have a wonderful holiday. Big Peter went back to his wife. She had taken off the yellow gown, and was wrapped in something thick and warm and fur-trimmed.

"You look like a white pussy-cat," he told her.

"Do you like me, Peter?"

"I love you."



IT is one thing, however, to agree to a plan of which you don't exactly approve, and it is another thing to adjust yourself to it. Little Peter's raptures when he heard of their trip to the farm puzzled his mother.

"But how do you know you are going to like it, Peter?"

"Well, Daddy has told me about it."

"You may not like it as well as Daddy did."

"Yes, I shall, Mother. Father says I can sit in the kitchen and watch Aunt Mary make doughnuts and sprinkle them with sugar when they come out of the fat. He used to do it when he was a little boy."

"But, darling, you know you are not allowed to eat doughnuts."

"Well, Daddy said I might, up there. He said if I walked a lot and cut down Christmas trees that even doughnuts wouldn't hurt my tummy."

"Did he say that you could cut down Christmas trees?"

"He said I could help." Little Peter's cheeks were scarlet with the excitement of it all. Lucia

sighed. She wished that Big Peter wouldn't upset her diet arrangements for her son. She was having a great many notes to write, and explanations to make over the telephone. It had seemed best to say that Big Peter needed a rest. She told that to the Lorings and the Stacys and to Muriel Abbott. They were all very sorry for her. Maude Maddox agreed to take the two old ladies from the home off her hands. The children who were to have sung the carols were given a little party on the day before Peter went away. The whole thing was perfectly managed, and all the mothers praised Lucia. After everybody had gone home. Little Peter was very polite about it. "They had a nice time, didn't they, Mother."

She was moved, unexpectedly, to ask, "Did you?"

Truth got the better of politeness, "Not so very."

"But why not, Peter?"

"Oh, it was like all other parties, Mother."

She stared at him, a little frown fretting her forehead. His words were an echo of his father's as they had driven home one night from a country club frolic. "They are all alike, Lucia. And nothing seems real."

She had wondered then what he meant by "real." As for herself, she had been chairman of the frolic committee, and things had really been

very well done. And everybody had been pleased — except Big Peter who called it " artificial " and " cut-and-dried."

" It would have been hopeless without the cocktails."

" But you didn't drink any, Peter? "

" I never do. And neither do you. Yet you seem to get a lot out of it."

Lucia was quite sure that Big Peter ought to get a lot out of it, too. But he didn't, and now here was Little Peter!

She packed their bags with warm things, thick sweaters and wool underwear. " I can't have my two Peters taking cold," she told them, " and those old country houses are apt to be freezing." She need not have worried, however. Uncle Bob's house was warm enough. Little Peter felt that it was warm not only to your outside feelings, but to those inside of you. You went straight into the lamp-lighted front room, and there were three cats on the hearth. The fire was back of them and the cats looked black. But when you came up to them they were three colors — one was gray and one was black and one was a bright and beautiful yellow.

Little Peter took the yellow cat on his lap. " I haven't had one since I was here that summer," he said to his Aunt Jean.

"There are more of them out in the barn."

Little Peter felt that he could sit there forever with that warm, fat pussy-cat in his arms. But his mother was saying, "May I put Peter to bed? It is so late for him."

"Doesn't he want something to eat?"

"We had dinner in the dining-car, Jean."

"But I *do* want something to eat, Mother."

"Peter!" Then gravely, "Well, a glass of milk," and Peter put down his cat and went with his aunt to get it.

They had to walk down three steps to the dairy; and there, around the wall on broad shelves, were pans of milk and all the room was sweet with the smell of it. And the floor was painted yellow, just the color of the cat, and the cream was yellow. And there was a dipper and a glass. While he drank his milk, Little Peter talked to his Aunt Jean. He didn't feel shy and he liked the way she listened. She seemed to put her mind to it, as his father did.

"We haven't any cats," Little Peter told her, "or any animals."

"Our pets are just a part of the family. There's old Cæsar. He goes everywhere with your uncle, and the people know the dog as well as the doctor . . . and there's young Brutus who watches the house. And there's Tessie, the old tortoise-shell pussy. She keeps her kittens at the barn. And it is always a great ceremony when she brings

them up to be fed. We all go out to see them. And she is so proud!"

"At home," said Peter, "I have my Noah's Ark, but of course the animals aren't alive."

"Still," said Aunt Jean, understandingly, "they are a great help. You can play they are real."

"That's what I do." Peter found himself telling about the camels on the honey-colored rug. "Three kings . . ."

Aunt Jean nodded, "Do you know," she said, and Peter thought she was a very beautiful lady in her blue linen dress, with her smooth shining hair and attentive blue eyes, "Do you know, I have often wondered what the animals thought when they first saw the Child."

"They fell on their knees," Peter elucidated.

She smiled, "That's just a legend, isn't it?"

"Well, Daddy says some people believe that they kneel down now on Christmas night."

"Do you believe it?"

Little Peter had finished his milk. He handed the glass to Aunt Jean. "Thank you," he said. Then, carefully, "They might kneel, you know."

He tucked his hand in hers as they went up the three steps together. He felt that he had had a very wonderful visit with Aunt Jean in the milk room. And they were very well acquainted. It was as if he had lived with her all his life.

THE TRANQUIL BEASTS

THE two days before Christmas were tremendously interesting to Little Peter.

It was a joyful adventure to get up early and help feed and water the stock, and watch the milking with Uncle Bob's three boys. Their names were Oliver and George and Theodore. Little Peter's mother thought that the boys' names should have been different. "Why didn't you carry on the family line?"

Aunt Jean smiled, "We decided to start a new one. We don't intend that our boys shall ever blame their ancestors for anything. We want them to think about their descendants."

"How queer," said Little Peter's mother.

"Well, it does sound queer," said Aunt Jean, "but they have three big names to live up to and they seem to like it."

The boys drove a fat little horse into town every morning to school. But the fat little horse was now having his holiday with the rest of them. He went up into the woods to help bring back the tree. Little Peter rode on his back part of the way. His father walked beside them, and the snow sparkled, and all the lovely young pines seemed like living things as they stood tall and straight in the sunshine. Little Peter winced when the axe cut into the trunk of one of the trees. His father saw it and said, "Isn't it better to die as a Christmas

tree, than to be blown down in a storm and rot on the ground?"

And later, Peter's father said to Uncle Bob, "That's the trouble in town . . . he has no contact with reality. Out here, among all the living things, life and death take on their proper proportions. I don't want him to shrink neurotically from the thought of pain and poverty and dissolution. I want him to accept them as a part of things —unafraid."

Getting ready for Christmas in his Aunt Jean's kitchen was, Little Peter found, a great event. One didn't just telephone to the butcher and baker and confectioner and have things quite magically brought to one's back door. Aunt Jean and her Swedish maid, Olga, baked the bread, and baked the cakes, and baked the pies: and the turnips and potatoes and onions were brought up from bins in the cellar, and the pickled peaches and jellies and mince-meat came down from the shelves of Aunt Jean's pantry. And the turkey! But that was the tragedy! The turkey came right out of a beautiful flock, all shining bronze, that Peter had seen in the sunshine! And Peter had to be consoled! Peter sat in the kitchen, and watched Aunt Jean make the mince pies. He thought the coal range much nicer than the gas range at home. The fire glowed in it and it gave out warmth, and

its great ovens baked loaves and loaves and loaves of the loveliest bread.

He liked the way, too, that Aunt Jean and Olga served the meals. They had two courses, and there were great dishes of potatoes and great bowls of gravy and great platters of meat . . . and everything was on the table at once except the dessert. And Uncle Bob said grace, and the grace that Uncle Bob said was this: "O Lord, make us strong men and good men, and strong women and good women. For Christ's sake, Amen." And he said this three times a day.

It seemed to Little Peter that one just had to be strong and good when one heard things like that three times a day in Uncle Bob's hearty voice.

He talked it over with his father. "Why don't you say it at our house?"

"Your mother likes the one I say better."

Little Peter was polite. "Oh, well, of course. Yours is nice . . . but Uncle Bob's sticks in your mind."

There was one thing that Big Peter had promised. They were to go out to the barn at midnight on Christmas Eve. There was a chance, Little Peter had said, that the animals might kneel.

"You mustn't be disappointed if they don't," his father had told him.

"Well, I won't. It's just a legend," said Little Peter, quoting Aunt Jean, "but then, you know, Daddy . . . they *might.*"

PETER found that while Aunt Jean was a very busy woman, she was not busy in the way that his mother was. She always seemed to find time for her boys and for Uncle Bob. When they came in, she would drift to the fire and the chintz chair, and sit there while they told her the news, or asked her opinion, or relieved their minds of some burden of thought. And at night she sat by the fire and knitted while the boys read aloud, or Uncle Bob told them all of his day's work.

"She reminds me," said Big Peter, "of my mother."

"She reminds me," said Lucia, with unexpected spite, "of a tranquil cow!"

"There are worse things," said Big Peter, "than a tranquil cow," and tried to laugh it off.

But he couldn't quite, and Lucia couldn't laugh either. And for a long time they were silent, and at last she said, "I don't know what is the matter with me to say a thing like that."

But the thing that was the matter with Lucia

was jealousy, although she didn't know it — jealousy, green-eyed, jaundiced.

And she was jealous of Aunt Jean! At first she hadn't been. She had felt superior. And self-satisfied. She knew that she was prettier than Aunt Jean. And better dressed. And her house was well-ordered. And Little Peter's manners were so perfect. And for the first few hours after she arrived, she had quite wanted to patronize Aunt Jean, and to tell her how to do things; how to run her house like clock-work, and how to teach old Olga to wait on the tables, to how to manage Uncle Bob so he wouldn't say that odd grace. And she had felt that all that food on the table at once was a mistake. People didn't eat that way any more. Not so heartily and heavily. There could be less informality, more exquisiteness; Jean was carrying simplicity to excess.

But after two days of it, Lucia began to feel that perhaps Jean was wiser than she had seemed. For Aunt Jean was like a sun around which her small world revolved. Her boys adored her. Her husband adored her. Bob never came in from his rounds without shouting, "Where's Jeanie?" and greeting her as if they had been parted for ages. His eyes shone for her. He was her comrade, her lover.

As for her boys. To see them at her feet while she knitted — young Ted's rough head against her

knee, the light in Oliver's glance as it met hers, the affectionate assurance with which young George demanded her opinion and got it — was to see a queen in her own domain. And Lucia was not a queen. She was rather dictator. Big Peter and Little Peter did what she wanted them to do. But they did it listlessly. At times they seemed to draw away from her. More and more they talked together, shut her out. As for her competency, didn't it consist merely in making up lists and ordering other people to do things? She had expert maids and an expert modiste. She couldn't make a dress. She couldn't cook a meal. She couldn't sweep a room or keep a set of books. And Jean could do all of these things.

But that didn't so much matter. The thing that mattered was that Jean was the sun who lighted her own small world. Lucia envied her that. Of course being a sun in a city apartment presented some difficulties. She wondered what Jean would do if she lived in town. She made up her mind to ask her.



IT was the night before Christmas. The tree was set up in the living-room, and there was the thick, spicy smell of it which Little Peter loved. And late in the afternoon, Little Peter and his cousins

had popped corn while the snow came down outside and they had strung it into chains, and while they had strung the chains they had talked about names.

His cousins' names had always seemed to Little Peter to be quite curious and satisfying. He felt that it must be very interesting to know that you were Oliver-*Cromwell* Blake, and George-*Washington* Blake, and Theodore-*Roosevelt* Blake.

"I am just Peter," he said, "like my father and grandfather."

"No," said Aunty Jean, who was knitting in her chintz chair. "You are Peter not only like your father and grandfather, but you are like Peter the Rock."

"Who was he, Aunt Jean?"

"Read about him, Oliver."

So Oliver read from a big shabby book, "'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!'"

And Peter, listening, felt tremendously thrilled. Not that he quite understood. But he understood enough to know that Peter of the Rock must be rather splendid to be named for — more splendid even than Cromwell or Washington or Roosevelt.

Then Lucia, who was sitting back in the shadows said, "Jean, I don't see how you do it."

"Do what?"

"Make yourself one of them."

"It is easy enough," said Aunt Jean, "if you take time for it."

Lucia wanted to say, "How can one take time in a city apartment?" But just then Uncle Bob came in, and Big Peter, and Uncle Bob had to have his supper at once. He was called out on a case, and Big Peter was going with him. "It is an operation and he can help me a lot. Up there in the hills it is hard to get anyone."

They had a hearty supper, and after supper, while Little Peter was feeding the cats in the pump-room, his father appeared in the doorway. He had on a fur coat, and a fur cap and he looked like a bear. "I'm sorry, old chap," he said, "I may not get back in time to go to the barn."

Little Peter straightened up, "Well, of course, if you can't, you can't."

"That's the way to take it. I'll get here if possible."

Little Peter went out and watched his father and Uncle Bob drive away. They were in a high-powered car which had been Big Peter's Christmas present to his brother. "One fee paid for it," he had said when Bob had protested, "I kept a millionaire from going blind."

"Great stuff," said Bob.

"But you don't envy me?"

Bob had shaken his head. "Each man to his own job; I am used to this."

The old dog Cæsar was curled up under a rug on the back seat as they drove away. He was getting very old and it was a cold night but he always howled when he was left behind.

After the men were gone, Aunt Jean and Little Peter's mother turned the young people out of the living-room and trimmed the tree. And Little Peter and his cousins went into the kitchen to make candy. It was really a most entrancing occupation. On the glowing range was a great saucepan full of molasses and sugar and butter. It boiled and bubbled and the whole place was soon filled with the satisfying fragrance. And there were big white platters with nut-meats on them. And you poured some of the taffy over the nut-meats, and some of it you pulled. And it was while Little Peter and his cousins pulled the taffy, that Lucia, tying a pink angel to the top of the tree, looked down at Jean and said, "If you lived in an apartment, what would you do?"

Jean looked up at her and laughed. "I'd move."

"I don't mean that. What would you do about living? I've been watching you and the boys and Bob. You are the center of their world. And I am not the center of mine."

"Well, it is this way," said Jean. "Bob and the boys are so interesting to me that nothing else counts."

"Do you mean that you like it so much?"

"Yes. They are full of the wine of life. When I am with them I seem to drink of it."

Lucia argued, "If you lived in the city you'd have to do as the Romans do."

"There would be a difference, of course," Jean admitted, "but the main thing is to get the right attitude of mind. Bob and the boys are my most gorgeous adventure. And they know it. So they open the gates of their dreams and off we go together!"

Lucia looked down from the step-ladder. "Little Peter has shut the gate of his dreams and locked me out."

"The key is in your own heart, Lucia," Jean said. "When your two Peters become the most important thing in the world to you, you'll become the most important thing to them."

Then after a moment, she added, "I always think of my boys as potential leaders of men. I want them to be that. I think they will be."

Lucia came down from the step-ladder. "It is Peter's bedtime." She laid her hand on Jean's shoulder. "Do you know that you are a most inspiring person?"

Jean reached up and patted the slender hand. "I know that you are a most beautiful one."

"Oh, *beauty,*" said Lucia, "half of it is my clothes!"

LITTLE Peter went to bed, but not to sleep. It was a tall bed with four posts, and a blue and white counterpane with a fringe. It had stopped snowing, and the open window made a square of clear blue light. The door which led to his mother's room was a golden space in which he could see her moving back and forth. Her hair was braided and wound around her head and she wore the warm, thick pussy-cat robe. Peter liked the pussy-cat robe, and so did his father. It had white fur at the neck and wrists. He heard his mother open her own window, then she came to the door. "Sleep, Peter?"

"No."

She bent above the bed. "I kissed you once, didn't I? Well, I'll kiss you twice, and three times, and then you must shut your eyes."

She knelt with her arms around him. "And when you wake it will be Christmas morning."

Peter knew that he would wake long before that. He was going out to the barn to see what the animals would do at midnight. If Daddy came, so much the better. But he wasn't going to lose this

chance to see whether the cows and the horses and the old sheep who churned the butter, would kneel.

For one moment he was tempted to ask his mother to go with him. But he knew what she would say, "How silly — to think that the animals *would.*" And that would spoil it.

He slept before he knew it and waked with a start. He wondered if it were midnight, and even while he wondered, he heard the grandfather's clock in the lower hall strike with a jangle of chimes — eleven. He lay, then, waiting, until another brief jangle marked the quarter after. He climbed out of bed, gathered up his clothes, and in his bare feet descended the stairs and made his way to the living-room.

It was all shadowy with the glow of the dim lamp and of the deep-hearted coals. The cats were curled up in a warm heap on the rug, the room was deliciously cozy after the keen air upstairs. He sat on the rug among the little cats and donned his stockings hastily, his shoes and underclothes, his knickers and jacket. Then he pulled over all, his thick sweater, and covered his ears with his knitted cap. He found a pencil, and wrote a note which he propped up against the lamp:

DEAR DADDY: I've gone to the barn. I thought I'd better not wait. I hope you will come.

PETER.

He felt very daring as he opened the door and went out into the night. The sky was powdered with stars; it seemed very high and different from the sky in the city which was always blurred by the electric lights.

Young Brutus, the watch dog, came out of his kennel, and trotted over the frozen snow ahead of Peter. He made no sound, and in the clear dark he looked long and lean, like a wolf. But Little Peter was not afraid of him. He was, indeed glad of his company.

The barn was lighted by a single lantern. Back among the shadows were the cows, comfortable on beds of straw. The old butter-sheep and a blind mare had open stalls to themselves. Beyond them were the strong, work horses and the lighter span which the doctor drove now and then. Tessie, the barn cat, came down to investigate the invasion. Peter sat on a feed box and took her in his lap and waited. It seemed wonderful to sit there in the company of all these living creatures — and to know that there were pigeons up among the rafters, and Tessie's kittens in the loft. There was a round barn clock, and it showed a quarter of twelve. Peter felt a tingling sense of excitement. Something must, he felt, in a moment, happen.

And now young Brutus was on his feet — stiff and suspicious — his eyes on the side door by which Peter had entered. The door opened. And Peter

saw a woman coming in. She wore a long blue cloak and carried a lantern. There was a scarf over her head which hid her face.

Peter knew at once why she had come. She was tired . . . and there was no room for her at the inn. . . .

He rose to his feet, and stood for a moment uncertain, then sent a breathless little cry across the intervening space. "*Mary!*"

. . . . . .

Lucia had waked to find Peter gone. She had slipped into the pussy-cat robe and had sought him downstairs. She had found the note propped against the lamp. She had dressed hurriedly. The blue cloak and scarf she had borrowed from the hall rack. They belonged to Jean, and fell about her own slender figure in voluminous folds.

She had lighted a lantern, and made her way to the barn. And now she was saying, her own breath quick, "It is Mother, darling," and Peter with dreams still in his eyes was stammering, "Why, I didn't know you!"

"Why did you come, Peter?"

"Well, I thought they might kneel — the animals, you know."

"Oh, at midnight?"

"Yes."

She glanced up at the clock, "Five minutes."

He was anxious. "May I stay?"

"Yes. Shall we sit here?" The feed-box was wide enough for both of them. She put her arm about Peter and he leaned against her. The blue cloak enfolded them; the lantern held them close in its circle of light.

In the moments that followed, the silence seemed to Lucia to flow up and around them in warm and shining waves. She was aware of all the living things so near them in the dark. Shut away here from the clamor of her own quick and changing world, she seemed to share something with these dumb and tranquil beasts.

Tranquillity! Was it that she had missed? Would Little Peter and Big Peter draw close if she shut them into a world of her own where peace reigned? And could they shut her out, if she shut them in?

Little Peter's breathless cry had moved her strangely. He had linked her by his vivid imagination to that other Mother; had bridged two thousand years and brought her close to that serene and gracious presence.

"Mother, it's twelve!" Little Peter's hand clutched her arm. "It's twelve!"

The old clock ticked a round of sixty seconds, another round. Little Peter was on his feet, his eager eyes sweeping the shadows, where the dark outlines loomed, unmoving and unchanged.

At last he drew a long, quivering breath. "Oh, they didn't do it, Mother."

She felt she must not fail him. "Darling," she said, "perhaps they knelt — in their hearts."

Far back in his eyes there dawned a light — the light which had shone hitherto only for Big Peter. His warm hand went into hers. He gave a contented little laugh. "Oh, well, it was wonderful to come, wasn't it?"

It was more wonderful than he knew!



AND now across the small-paned windows swept the streaming gold of motor lamps, there was the purr of the engine. Silence. Then the great door slid back and Big Peter peered in. "Who's here?"

Little Peter gave a great shout and fell upon him. "It's Mother, Daddy, and me."

"Lucia?"

She came forward. "Yes. Where's Bob?"

"He stayed all night." Big Peter's voice trailed away. He stood staring. Lucia in that blue cloak . . . among the golden shadows. Why, the thing was like an old painting! "Do you know," he asked abruptly, "that you make me think of the Madonna?"

"Little Peter saw it, too," she said. She laid her hand on his arm, looking up at him. "When I came in he called me . . . Mary."

He was at once aware that she was deeply moved. His own heart-beats quickened. His arm went around her. "All mothers are Marys, my darling." She leaned her head against him, loving his tenderness. With the child they stood in the circle of light made by the lantern.

And it was Christmas morning!

THREE WHO STOLE AT CHRISTMAS TIME



THREE WHO STOLE AT CHRISTMAS TIME

IT is bad enough to be poor on Christmas eve. But to be poor plus an imagination is to have an excess of poverty.

Hardinger, plodding through the snowy streets, could picture mentally all that was going on inside the houses whose illumined windows broke the blackness of the night. Dinners were cooking — the thought of the savory food made his pulses leap as they leap for a man who thinks of his beloved. Hardinger felt that he had indeed reverted to the primitive when hunger swallowed up every other emotion.

Food! He wanted it as a wolf wants it in the dead of winter — or a starved cat in an alley. Yet he had not a penny with which to buy bread. And he was not a beggar.

He was *not* a beggar. He told himself that with an almost frantic emphasis on the negative, as he found himself mounting the steps of a terrace at the top of which was a great house. The windows

of the house were rose-lighted, a candle set in each of them.

He could see, when he reached the top of the steps, straight into a room which he judged might be the library. The rose light came from the shaded lamps. There was a leaping rosy fire. And a girl in a rose gown. There was a man, too, sitting somewhat back among the shadows. Two men. Another woman. But the light centered in the girl. Her arms were bare — her dress a mere wisp of tulle!

"Gee!" said Hardinger, looking in. So might a peri stand at Eden's gate — shut out.

He turned away, followed the stone walk to the back of the house. Here, too, were lighted windows. One of them was open. The heat of the kitchen overflowed into the freezing night. An overhang of the roof kept off the falling snow, and Hardinger, standing a little back, could see the cook busy among her pots and pans. She was brown-haired, plump, and wore blue gingham and an ample apron. She was, he judged from her quick step, young. Her face was turned from him.

She opened the door of the oven and drew out a great roast of beef. The air was filled at once with a maddening fragrance. Potatoes were browning in the fat about the roast. The cook basted it all with a big spoon. There was no cover to deaden with steam the rare flavor of the meat.

Hardinger knew how such things should be. His mother had taught him. He had cooked many a meal for her on the farm when she was too ill to sit up, and there were farmhands with huge appetites.

Another woman came into the kitchen — a waitress in trim black, with crisp white cuffs, an apron and a cap. Her voice had a note of sharpness, as she spoke to the cook.

"Mrs. Compton says things must be ready at seven. Her grandchildren are coming for the Christmas tree. I am getting the cocktails ready."

The cook turned, and Hardinger saw her smiling youthful countenance.

"Oh, well, everything's done."

Pressing as close as he dared, Hardinger saw a great ladle dipped into a steaming pot, saw the soup, a clear amber stream, poured into the plates. Sensing the savor of it, he groaned.

The cook lifted her head. Listened. "Did you hear anything, Blanche?"

"Hear what?" Blanche's mind was on the serving of the meal, and on her own romance, which had to do with the Compton chauffeur. He was going to give her a Christmas present, and she hoped for a ring. She had rather a scorn of Kate, the cook, who had no romance. "I didn't hear anything," she said over her shoulder as she went out of the kitchen.

Hardinger, falling back a little from the window, saw the roast lifted out of the oven and set on a lordly silver platter; saw three vegetables put in other silver dishes; saw Kate turn to the garnishing of the salad, to the toasting of crackers, to the warming of Camembert.

It was at this stage he discovered that the oven held further treasure — a pudding in a round porcelain dish. The porcelain dish fitted in turn into a round silver receptacle, and the pudding showed all gold and brown above the rim.

"It is too hot," said Kate, the cook, as Blanche came in from serving the main course. "I was late getting at it, with all the other things. I'll put it out of doors until it is time to take it in."

She went toward the window, set the dish on the wide sill, and returned to her toasting crackers. Within reach of Hardinger's hand the pudding basked in its richness.

He was not a thief! So he fled from temptation. Nor was he a beggar at a back door. The kindly cook might hand him bread. But it would not be hers to bestow. He would ask the master of the house for work. Anything — that might be paid for with food.

He rang the bell of the front door. Blanche answered it.

"Mr. Compton," she said, when Hardinger had preferred his request, "is at dinner."

Hardinger persisted. "It is important that I should see him."

Mr. Compton came presently, tall, thin-faced, keen-eyed, a white crest of hair.

"I am hungry. I want work."

"Why haven't you a job?"

"I am trying to get one."

"You might know I'd have no work for you at this hour. You'd better look up some of the city lodging houses."

"The city lodging house," said Hardinger, "is twelve miles away, and I haven't a penny in my pocket."

His words died on the empty air. The door was shut!

He took tragic stock of himself. He had become, at last, a beggar. He had, indeed, asked for work, but there had been behind his request the hope that work or not, they would give him what he wanted. That they would have warmth in their hearts as in their houses on Christmas eve.

'Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief!' How silly to have a rhyme like that! Yet it was a logical sequence. He made his way back to the kitchen with its open window. The pudding was still there in its silver dish.

BASIL DRAKE was the sole guest that night at the Compton table. He lived a two-days' journey from the New York suburb where his hosts had their home. But he had been a friend and a comrade of Bruce Compton, their only son, who had fallen at Belleau Wood.

It was the second time he had dined on Christmas eve with the Comptons. The first time he had come because of Bruce. The family had wanted to hear many things. And he had told them. There had been Mr. and Mrs. Compton and their daughter — Cathleen.

And this time he had come because of Cathleen.

He could not have explained why she drew him. He did not, in many ways, approve of her. There was, he felt, a lack of womanly softness. She laughed at things — at life. Even when he talked of Bruce, she had listened dry-eyed to the end. And tonight there had been an edge of hard brilliance which had repelled him. Yet she was lovely — with her bare arms, her rosy draperies.

It was toward the end of dinner, however, that he saw her in a new aspect. Her father, coming back from the front door, said,

"A beggar."

Cathleen asked, "Did you send him around to the kitchen?"

"I sent him away."

"Oh, *no!*" it was a poignant note.

A light leaped up in Basil's eyes.

"Of course I sent him away. A strong man. Able to work — and plenty of work everywhere."

"But on a night like this, Daddy."

She rose to her feet. "Oh, I'm going to see if I can't call him back."

Her father's voice was sharp. "Don't be foolish, Cathleen."

"But it seems so cruel." She faced her father for a moment, and then sat down. Drake was subtly aware that the hardness she had shown was a shell of protection against this other hardness which forced her now back into her seat.

Yet even as she yielded, he made himself her champion. "Do you mind," he asked, "if I go out and look for him? I've a sort of fellow-feeling. I've been hungry myself. Ravenous. There were three days in the Vosges — "

Cathleen's eyes thanked him; Compton's were chilly. "Do as you please, of course."

Drake came back to say that there was no sign of the wanderer. Mrs. Compton swept the conversation tactfully into other channels. Dessert was served in a glass dish.

"Peaches, Blanche?" said Mrs. Compton. "I thought there was to be a pudding."

"Yes, Mrs. Compton." Blanche's voice was lowered. She felt that an explanation should not

have been pushed at the moment. Yet she was stirred by excitement as she said, "The pudding was stolen."

"Stolen."

"Yes, Mrs. Compton. The cook set it outside the window to cool, and when she went to get it, it was gone."

Compton asserted triumphantly: "Our beggar was the thief. I'd be willing to bet on it. I shall call up the police."

Cathleen begged, white with distress, "Oh, Dad; don't."

"Why not?"

"It is Christmas eve. And it's only a pudding."

"The principle is the same."

"After he ate it, he put the dish back," Blanche supplemented.

"Dish or no dish, he did it. I'll get an officer on the job."

And now it was Drake who protested.

"Oh, let the poor devil go."

"And anyhow, we're to blame," Cathleen broke in; "we drove him to it." Her cheeks matched the rose of her gown.

"Nonsense." Yet they could see that he wavered.

At the moment the bell rang. Blanche went to the door and ushered in all the grandchildren—this was no time to think of beggars!

The tree was a gorgeous thing of shining balls, floating silver streamers and little lights like stars.

Compton played Santa Claus. He was not in costume, but he proved unexpectedly human and rollicking. His speeches of presentation were to the point, and caused roars of laughter. The gifts were piled up on little tables — the enchanting things that people buy who do not count the cost. Compton was not affluent, but his daughters had all done well for themselves. There were millions among them.

As the parcels were opened, there was the color and glow of rich fabrics, of rare porcelains, books in hand-tooled bindings of red leather and of blue picked out with gold — there was for Cathleen an Egyptian scarab, a Spanish shawl and a high carved comb, slipper buckles, a flaming and lovely fan.

The children's toys were expensive and exquisite. The dolls walked and talked, and wore sheer little robes of turquoise and daffodil and jade, with slippers to match, and hats. The boys had miniature air-ships and automobiles, with nickel and enamel, and upholstered as handsomely as their fathers' limousines and touring cars. It was all as gorgeous as an Eastern bazaar, as sophisticated as a Fifth Avenue shop!

And outside that door a man had asked for bread!

MIDNIGHT. All the mad bells ringing. Christmas morning. Snow still falling. Wind still blowing. The world asleep.

In the great house, the head of it restless, not because he had denied a beggar at the door, but because of his dreams of the son who would never come back. He had had no hardness for Bruce. And how could he sleep with the thought of those other mornings when the boy had been the first to cry "A Merry Christmas."

His wife, too, was restless. She, too, remembered. She had read late, and he had seen her light. He had wanted to go to her, but had refrained because in these later years he had not been demonstrative. It was enough, he thought, that each knew the other cared.

Cathleen could not sleep. She saw a shabby man out in a storm. She saw Drake's eyes lighted up. There had been a new note in his voice when he had told her "Good-night."

Drake, waking and sleeping, saw Cathleen. He got out of bed and went to the window, looking out into the wild night. This, then, was the meaning of life. To find at the ultimate moment the One Woman. Quite unexpectedly he felt that the thing was sacred. He wanted to lift up his heart to high Heaven, as he had lifted it up when at the end of that last dreadful night in the Vosges he

had seen help coming over the hills in the grey of the dawn.

In all that house only Kate, the cook, slept soundly. She had said her prayers when she went to bed. She would say them again in the morning. She had her day's work to do, and she would do it to the top of her strength. She felt no grudge against any fellow creature. Quite simply and pleasantly she loved the world and the people in it.

Blanche, the waitress, rather scorned her for her point of view. "You'll get taken in," had been her warning, "trusting people like that."

Christmas morning was, however, to see Kate stirred from her calm. Blanche had had too much on her mind to talk about a stolen pudding. She had been eager to keep her tryst with her lover. The moment dinner was served she had flown to him. And she had slept that night with his ring on her finger.

Hence, not wasting words, she had given Kate merely the bare bones of the incident. After a night's rest she was more communicative, and so it happened that while Kate was baking the breakfast waffles, Blanche told of the beggar who had been turned away.

"They are sure it was the same man who stole the pudding."

"Who turned him away?" Kate demanded.

"Mr. Compton."

Now, as I have perhaps indicated, Kate the cook had a warm heart and a sweet nature. She inherited them down through several generations from that ancestor of hers, Manus O'Donnell, who is described in history as a "fierce warrior, but hospitable and generous to the poor and to the Church." Four centuries of less picturesque civilization had modified the war-like qualities of the O'Donnells, but there remained in the breast of every one of them a remnant of the fierceness which had characterized the mighty Manus.

So Kate, the cook, feeling that wild blood flow fast in her veins, said, at white heat: "*The beast!*"

She flung out the words with such force that there was the effect at once in that serene kitchen of uproar and disorder.

Blanche, nervous in the face of emotions she could not measure, said, "Well, you needn't look like that."

"Like what?"

"Awful — and your face is as red as a beet!"

"I don't care how I look."

Blanche shrugged and related other details.

"Mr. Compton was going to call the police. But Miss Cathleen begged him not to. And then the family came."

"Did you see the presents they got?" Kate's indignation drove her voice into sharpness. "Yet they didn't have a crust for a hungry man."

"Oh, well, he wasn't much of a man."

"How do you know?"

"He stole the pudding. I don't think much of that kind."

"What kind?"

"People who don't mind breaking the law."

"Don't Mr. Compton break them? Look at the bottles in his cellar. He wants his cocktails, and he gets them. A starving man wants a pudding, and he takes it. What's the difference?"

"I hope you are not saying it's right to steal?"

"I am not. But who is Mr. Compton to set himself up?" With a sudden jerk Kate untied the bow of her apron. "I am going in and tell him what I think of him."

Blanche's consternation was acute. "Are you crazy?"

"I *am* not." Kate's calm was that of a suppressed fury.

BLANCHE, fully unnerved, begged: "Oh, bake the waffles. You can't break right into the middle of breakfast."

Kate was grim. "I can!" But she hesitated; then, seeing Blanche's pale countenance, capitulated. "Oh, well, I'll wait. But after that, I'm done."

She tied on her apron, picked up the great pitcher, poured batter into her waffle-iron, and turned it, producing presently a waffle which for brownness and crispness could not be excelled: and after that another and another — for in the dining-room, on that cold morning, appetites were keen.

With every waffle that went in, however, Kate's conscience accused her of supineness. "They deserved to go hungry," she snapped, as the last instalment of delectable cakes left the kitchen.

Deliberately after breakfast the young cook washed the dishes, prepared the vegetables, and put the turkey in the roasting-pan. Then she made her way to the front part of the house.

It was seldom that her softly-shod feet crossed the Persian rugs and polished floors. That was Blanche's domain. Kate's place was at the back. Last night, she had, however, gone decorously with Blanche to receive her gifts, which were with the others on the tree.

There had been a dress from Mrs. Compton, ten dollars from Mr. Compton, and a pair of frivolous silk stockings from Cathleen. Mr. Drake had added another bill and a box of candy.

Kate had been with the Comptons five years, and had served them faithfully. But now she surveyed them austerely as they sat in the library. They were all there with Drake.

"I've come to tell you," she said at once, "that I am not going to cook your Christmas dinner."

"*What!*"

It had the effect of a chorus, out of which sounded presently Mrs. Compton's troubled question, "What's the matter?"

"I've just heard that last night you wouldn't give that man anything to eat."

"Well?" Compton's question was staccato.

Kate faced him. "Perhaps you think it isn't my business. But — well, it's like this, Mr. Compton — I don't want to live with people who'd do a thing like that."

"He was a thief and broke the law." Compton was obviously trying to be patient.

Then Kate saw red: "He isn't the only man who breaks the laws," her clear voice challenged. "There's wine in your cellar."

Dead silence, out of which Cathleen said: "She's right, Dad. You bought it."

"Do you think I am going to let a cook decide whether I shall keep a rotten law?"

"Perhaps," and now it was Drake who challenged him, "the man who stole the pudding thinks the law rotten."

"OH," Kate went on, "I ain't excusing him. But do you know what it means to be staring in a window and see everybody warm and comfortable, and with hot food on the table, and to be wishing and wishing that you might sit for a moment by the fire and have something in your stomach? I know what it means," her voice was shaking. "I've been hungry. I used to stand outside windows, and look in where they baked hot cakes and poured sirup over them, and had lots of butter. And at home there was dry bread and a bit of dripping. And on Christmas day we had stew, and there wasn't much meat on the bone, and we had to do the best we could with gravy and onions and potato. And I know this, Mr. Compton: if you had brought that man in and had set him in my kitchen, and had asked him a few questions, you'd have known in a minute whether he was bad or just down and out. And either way it wouldn't have hurt you — and it was Christmas eve. And look at the things you gave your family. And it didn't mean much to them. But it would have meant a lot to that man." She stopped, breathless.

"That will do," Compton told her, frigidly. "As I said before, I can't have you sitting in judgment."

"Well, I've got to say this. I won't cook a dinner for a thief. You robbed a man of hope, Mr.

Compton, and that's worse than stealing a pudding."

Drake wanted to applaud. Oh, but she was beautiful, this fine young creature. A kitchen goddess, perhaps, but none the less a goddess.

"Kate," Mrs. Compton was saying, "you know we are going to have guests."

"Yes'm. And the turkey is in the pan, and the vegetables ready, and the plum pudding is in the pot. But I am not going to cook them. I am giving notice." She dropped a crumpled bill on the table. "You can take that back. I don't want it. It would burn my fingers if I thought you had it in your pocket when a man asked for bread."

Compton picked up the money, "That's tommy-rot. And we can get someone to cook our dinner. We are not at the mercy of a sentimental virago."

And then Cathleen flung out, "She's right"; and she was weeping.

And Basil Drake, seeing her tenderness, wanted her in his arms.

"You need not think I blame you, Miss Cathleen," Kate was saying. "You wouldn't hurt a kitten."

"That's quite enough," Compton stormed, and Kate marched out, her head held high. Mrs. Compton said wearily: "We can't get any one at this hour. We'd better just call up and tell people not to come."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," Compton informed her. "There are, of course, plenty of cooks."

But there were not. The local caterers were all busy, and the agencies were closed. It was too late to get any one from town. Oh, the thing was unspeakable. Compton came back from the telephone to say savagely:

"A little more of this, and I shall wonder if the world has gone mad."

He had a feeling that none of the family sympathized with him. Nor Drake. He turned his back on them, walked to the window, and stood looking out.

A man was coming up the front steps. He wore an old red sweater under his shabby coat, and a sprig of holly in his cap. It was still snowing, he was whitened by it, and it was deep under his feet, but he walked with a steady and swinging gait — as a man might march to hidden music.

He rang the bell — then lifted his cap to shake the snow from it.

Compton saw his face, recognized him, strode to the door, and opened it. He did not quite know what he intended to do, but he had a feeling that here was the outlet for all the rage which was consuming him. On the head of this man should be heaped the anathemas he deserved for upsetting that household.

But the man stood there, smiling, his cap in his hand — gay with the red of his holly and the red of his sweater. "I have come," he said, "to pay for the pudding."

HARDINGER had stolen the pudding with no more thought of offense against the law than a wolf feels who snatches meat when he is starving.

He had eaten it in the garage, wrapped in a rug which he had found in Compton's car. He had, indeed, sat on the cushions of the limousine and had feasted in state and elegance. There was a chance that the chauffeur might arrive, but he had taken the chance. He had been content to be warm for the moment and savor the fineness of the rich food. Milk and eggs had gone into the making. It was ambrosia, manna — all the delights of a thousand meals he had missed rolled into one.

When he had finished, he had put the silver dish back. It had been a daring thing to do. He could see that the thief had been discovered and that the cook and the waitress were talking wildly together.

"We'll have to give them *something,*" Blanche was asserting.

And Kate, the cook, flinging open wide the door

of a certain cupboard had decided, "Canned peaches — and there's plenty of cake."

He had waited then, back among the shadows. He had seen Kate's start of surprise when she turned and found the silver dish. She had opened the door and had peered out into the night. She had said, indeed, in her rich young voice,

"Who's there?"

For a moment he had been tempted to answer her. She had seemed such a gracious figure as she stood against the golden light. He wanted a word from her as much as a moment ago he had wanted food. But he dared not speak.

Yet the thought of her stayed with him, as he crept away into the night. He had heard her say to Blanche in the midst of her distraction:

"Some poor hungry soul. May God go with him!"

Her voice had a break in it. He had found the tears starting to his eyes. They had frozen on his cheeks.

He felt that if he might go back and sit in that warm kitchen with that compassionate soul all of life would be changed for him. That it would grow full and big as it had been before he went to France.

Of course, the whole thing was his own fault. He faced that squarely. The war had been a great adventure — a terrible adventure, with Death like

a leaping hound constantly at his heels. But in a way he had grown to crave excitement; and coming back he had found things tame.

He had found, too, his widowed mother dead. The mortgaged farm sold for debt. There was no other member of the family. He was alone. He had drifted to the city — idle. He had picked up a bit of money here and there. But his life had been at loose ends — and so he had come to this snowy night — a beggar. A thief!

He faced that squarely, too. It was useless for him to try to find excuses. To say that other men were as bad. His own sins must be on his own shoulders. His mother had taught him that.

But in the meantime, he had eaten the pudding. He might have returned a purse, or a silver dish. But a pudding — the thing was, of course, impossible —

There remained only one thing. To pay for it.



As he tramped on and on through the snow, he had found himself wanting more and more to sway level in his thoughts with that upstanding young creature in the Compton kitchen.

The rich food had given him added energy. Striding down the hill, he found at the turn of the

corner a moving picture palace. People were passing in and out — and the wet snow rose above the fine shoes of the women. Hardinger asked for the job of cleaning off the snow. Got it. Went away with enough in his pocket to pay for coffee, a big sandwich, a subway fare, and a bed for the night.

The next morning he had risen early and cleaned off more snow. By half-past ten he was again speeding back to the suburb where the Comptons lived, with two dollars in his pocket, and an added sense of self-respect. The bit of holly in his cap was his only Christmas gift. An Italian vendor had seen his eyes upon it, had broken off a bit and offered it to him. Between the two men had flashed a glance of understanding as Hardinger had stuck it in his cap.

"Fine, fine!" the Italian had said, and Hardinger had responded heartily.

"A Merry Christmas."

And now he was facing a man who did not understand. "What do you mean," Compton was demanding, "by saying you will pay for the pudding. Do you think you can settle it like that — casually? As if it didn't matter?"

"It does matter. And I've got two dollars. I cleaned off the snow and earned it."

"How do I know you earned it?"

Hardinger shrugged his shoulders. "You have my word."

"The word of a thief."

"Oh, well, if you prefer to think the worst."

"I prefer not to think of you at all."

"In that event," Hardinger's hand was in his pocket, "you'll let me pay?"

"I'd rather give you to the police."

"On Christmas morning?"

"On Christmas morning or any other morning. I'm not sentimental."

"I should judge," Hardinger responded, "that you are not."

"Sentimentality," said Compton didactically, "is the curse of people of your class. I have just lost my cook because she chose to think that you were badly treated — that I should have given food to a beggar. She has refused to cook our Christmas dinner because I called you a thief."

It seemed to Hardinger as if in that moment the whole world was lighted by something ineffable — a woman's faith in him. But to Compton he said:

"You have made one mistake. I am not in the same class with your cook. I should say she was in a class by herself. Something finer than the rest of us, finer than you are who use Christmas symbols and forget their meaning."

"You talk like a book," Compton said, "and I don't know what you mean, or why I stand here talking to you."

"Oh, I've read enough, if it comes to that.

And what I mean by symbols is that you say ' A Merry Christmas ' and ' Peace on Earth ' but what you really mean is that you'll make it merry and peaceful for your own flesh and blood and let the rest of the world go hang. I'm not trying to excuse myself. I know better. I come from plain farmer folk. Honest. That's my class, if you'll let me borrow your word. And it's a good enough class for me. I wish to God I was back today in my mother's warm kitchen. . . ."

He brought himself up sharply. " Look here," he said; " why can't we square the thing? I ate your pudding; let me cook your dinner. I've roasted more than one turkey at the old farm."

Compton's laugh was unpleasant. " Do you think I'd trust a thief? "

" Cut that out," Hardinger said wearily. " Would I have tramped out here with two dollars in my pocket if I hadn't been straight? "

Compton hesitated. " Come in," he said at last. " It will be a good joke on Kate." His tightened lips suddenly relaxed into a reluctant smile.

Hardinger followed him to the library. Stood at ease, cap in hand, while Compton stated the case. Drake studied him. Then remarked:

" You were overseas."

" Yes."

" I thought so." He turned to his hostess. " If I were you, Mrs. Compton, I'd take him in."

"Compton?" Hardinger's startled exclamation seemed to break against the blank wall of their astonishment. "That was the name of the captain of my company . . . Bruce . . . Bruce Compton. . . ."

THE silence which fell upon them was that of those who face a strange and unbelievable circumstance. Out of it at last Compton stammered: "You knew — my son?"

"I brought him from the field," Hardinger told them simply. "I got my D. S. M. for that."

He showed it under his tattered coat. They crowded around him, Mrs. Compton weeping, Cathleen catching his arm, saying breathlessly:

"Oh, we looked for you everywhere. Advertised. Oh, to think that it was *you!*"

And Compton's white lips were trying to frame an apology. "If I had known last night — when I turned you — away."

"Oh, that's all right," Hardinger, plainly unfortable, was saying. "Make 'em stop thanking me, Mr. Drake. And lead me to the turkey."

"Do you think," Compton demanded, "that I am going to let you cook the dinner? You are to be our guest."

But Hardinger shook his head. "Honestly, I'd rather not. I ain't your kind. I was a good top sergeant, but I'm nothing in high society. I'll have a plate to myself at the kitchen table, and feel like a king."

He stopped as a vision appeared in the doorway, a pink and white and blue treasure of a cook.

"Oh, Mrs. Compton," Kate said with agitation. "I've been crying my eyes out. I can't spoil Christmas for you and Miss Cathleen. I ain't saying much about Mr. Compton, and I'm frank to state that I wouldn't cook the dinner if it was for him alone. But the turkey's in the oven, and the pudding's in the pot, and I've said a prayer for the poor soul that stole the other one."

Then Hardinger stepped forward and said, "I'm the poor soul that stole the pudding, and I need your prayers."

A beautiful flush came into Kate's cheeks. She tried to speak, and could not go on. She began again, "Well, I wouldn't have believed that you'd come back."

"I came to pay for the pudding."

"There," she said, facing Mr. Compton squarely, "I told you so! And isn't it a beautiful thing to think of?"

She was a beautiful thing to think of. Drake wanted to tell her so. But it was Cathleen who went forward and, in sight of them all, kissed her.

"Kate, dear Kate, he knew my brother. He knew Bruce."

And she cried as if her heart would break.



WELL, two cooks did not spoil the dinner. They worked blithely together, seasoning the food with friendliness and good comradeship and a sense of high romance.

Even Blanche saw the signs of what was happening. "She's never been in love with anybody," she whispered to Hardinger as he helped her with the turkey in the butler's pantry.

"Thank God!" His response was fervent.

Blanche with the silver platter held aloft, the turkey a proud and nut-brown beauty, plump with stuffing, flung over her shoulder, "She's the one that ought to thank God!" and sailed into the dining-room.

Romance, too, was there — Drake and Cathleen, unmistakable. Blanche, passing savory dishes competently, caught Drake's low-voiced remark: "I'd steal, if I thought I could get away with it."

And Cathleen, helping herself to mashed potatoes, asked, with no more concern for Blanche than if she had been a dummy, "What would you steal?"

And Drake, over his own mashed potatoes: "Your heart."

It was a wonder, Blanche told herself, that anybody could serve properly with a thing like that going on, yet when she went the rounds again with the currant jelly, what did she hear but,

"*Darling . . .*"

And after this to go into the kitchen and find Kate with her eyes shining . . .

And why shouldn't they shine? For she and Hardinger had found a future. Which is a great thing to find on Christmas day or any other day. And Kate wore in her breast the bit of holly that Hardinger had had tucked in his cap.

And he had said to her, "I have nothing else, dear Kate, to give you, but I give you this with all my heart."

And Kate had said, "What more do I want than that?" And Blanche, rushing in, had been so astounded by the situation that she forgot that she had come for the scalloped oysters, and had to be recalled by Mrs. Compton's bell.

Then, when dinner in the dining-room was over, and Blanche had gone off with her chauffeur, leaving Hardinger and Kate alone, the two of them sat on each side of the table and talked of things present and things that were past, and things that were to come. . . .

"You see," Hardinger said wistfully, "there ought to be a chance for me."

"A man makes his own chances," said Kate, stoutly, "and nothing can hold you back."

And just then, as if a Christmas fairy had waved a wand, there marched into the kitchen the master of the house, and behind him marched Basil Drake with the air of a conqueror.

And Hardinger rose to his feet, and they stood there together — three of a kind — three thieves at Christmastide — the man who had stolen a pudding — the man who had stolen hope from a beggar — and the man who had stolen the heart of a girl.

For Drake was going to marry Cathleen! And it was about this that they had come to talk to Hardinger.



WE are going to live on my place up near the Canadian line — I've got a model farm. And I want you to look after it. There's a little house you can have for yourself."

"I don't want it for myself," said Hardinger, "I want it for Kate," and held out his hand to her and drew her to him. "A few minutes ago I gave her a bit of holly and my heart. I saw no hope then of anything else. But she was ready to

have me. And now I can offer her a house and a home."

His voice broke at that . . .

But Kate with her cheeks as red as the holly at her breast said, " It is his heart I want," and stood there beside him, proud and happy.

And Compton, looking on, saw his cook for the first time, not as a servant, but as a woman. And he saw her as Drake saw her, as beautiful because she was kind. And he saw her as Hardinger saw her, as the help and hope of a man's awakened soul.

THE RED CANDLE



THE RED CANDLE

IT was so cold that the world seemed as stiff and stark as a poet's hell. A little moon was frozen against a pallid sky. The old dark houses with their towers and gables wore the rigid look of iron edifices. The saint over the church door at the corner had an icicle on his nose. Even the street lights shone faint and benumbed through clouded glass.

Ostrander, with his blood like ice within his veins, yearned for a Scriptural purgatory with red fire and flame. To be warm would be heaven. It was a wise old Dante who had made hell cold!

As he crossed the threshold of his filthy tenement he felt for the first time a sense of its shelter. Within its walls there was something that approached warmth, and in his room at the top there was a bed with a blanket.

Making his way toward the bed and its promise of comfort, he was stopped on the second stairway by a voice which came out of the dark.

"Mr. Tony, you didn't see our tree."

Peering down, he answered the voice: "I was going up to get warm."

"Milly said to tell you that we had a fire."

"A real fire, Pussy? I didn't know that there was one in the world."

He came down again to the first floor. Pussy was waiting — a freckled dot of a child tied up in a man's coat.

The fire was in a small round stove. On top of the stove something was boiling. The room was neat but bare, the stove, a table, and three chairs its only furnishing. In a room beyond were two beds covered with patchwork quilts.

On the table was a tree. It was a Christmas tree — just a branch of pine and some cheap spangly things. The mother of the children sewed all day and late into the night. She had worked a little longer each night for a month that the children might have the tree.

There was no light in the room but that of a small and smoky lamp.

Milly spoke of it. "We ought to have candles."

Ostrander, shrugged close to the stove, with his hands out to its heat, knew that they ought to have electric lights, colored ones, a hundred perhaps, and a tree that touched the stars!

But he said: "When I go out I'll bring you a red candle — a long one — and we'll put it on the shelf over the table."

Milly, who was resting her tired young body in a big rocker with the baby in her arms, asked: "Can

we put it in a bottle or stand it in a cup? We haven't any candlestick."

"We can do better than that," he told her, "with a saucer turned upside down and covered with salt to look like snow."

Pussy, economically anxious, asked, "Can we eat the salt afterward?"

"Of course."

"Then, may we do it, Milly?"

"Darling, yes. How nice you always fix things, Mr. Tony!"

Long before he had known them he had fixed things — things which would have turned this poor room into an Aladdin's palace. There was that Christmas Eve at the Daltons'. It had been his idea to light the great hall with a thousand candles when they brought in the Yule log, and to throw perfumed fagots on the fire.

He came back to the round stove and the tiny tree. "I like to fix things," he said. "Once upon a time — "

They leaned forward eagerly to this opening.

"Of course you know it isn't true," he prefaced.

"Of course it couldn't be true" — Pussy was reassuringly sceptical — "the things that you tell us couldn't really happen — ever — "

"Well, once upon a time, there was a tree in a great house, by a great river, and it was set in a great room with squares of black-and-white marble

for a floor, and with a fountain with goldfish swimming in its basin, and there were red-and-blue parrots on perches, and orange-trees in porcelain pots, and the tree itself wasn't a pine-tree or a fir or a cedar; it was a queer round, clipped thing of yew, and it had red and blue and orange balls on it, and in the place of a wax angel on top there was a golden Buddha, and there were no candles — but the light shone out and out of it, like the light shines from the moon."

"Was it a Christmas tree?" Pussy asked, as he paused.

"Yes, but the people who trimmed it and the ones who came to see it didn't believe in the Wise Men, or the Babe in the Manger, or the shepherds who watched their flocks by night — they just worshiped beauty and art — and other gods — but it was a corking tree — "

"You use such funny words," Pussy crowed ecstatically. "Who ever heard of a corking tree?"

He smiled at her indulgently. He was warmer now, and as he leaned back in his chair and unbuttoned his coat he seemed to melt suddenly into something that was quite gentlemanly in pose and outline. "Well, it really was a corking tree, Pussy."

"What's a Buddha?" Milly asked, making a young Madonna of herself as she bent over the baby.

"A gentle god that half of the world worships," Ostrander said, "but the people who put him on the tree didn't worship anything — they put him there because he was of gold and ivory and was a lovely thing to look at."

"Oh," said Pussy, with her mouth round to say it, "oh, how funny you talk, Mr. Tony!" She laughed, with her small hands beating her knees.

She was presently, however, very serious, as she set the table. There was little formality of service. Just three plates and some bread.

Milly, having carried the baby into the other room, was hesitatingly hospitable. "Won't you have supper with us, Mr. Tony?"

He wanted it. There was a savory smell as Milly lifted the pot from the stove. But he knew there would be only three potatoes — one for Pussy and one for Milly and one for the mother who was almost due, and there would be plenty of gravy. How queer it seemed that his mind should dwell on gravy!

"Onions are so high," Milly had said, as she stirred it. "I had to put in just a very little piece."

He declined hastily and got away.

In the hall he met their mother coming in. She was a busy little mother, and she did not approve of Ostrander. She did not approve of any human being who would not work.

" A merry Christmas," he said to her, standing somewhat wistfully above her on the stairs.

She smiled at that. " Oh, Mr. Tony, Mr. Tony, they want a man in the shop. It would be a good way to begin the New Year."

" Dear lady, I have never worked in a shop — and they wouldn't want me after the first minute — "

Her puzzled eyes studied him. " Why wouldn't they want you? "

" I am not — dependable — "

" How old are you? " she asked abruptly.

" Twice your age — "

" Nonsense — "

" Not in years, perhaps — but I have lived — oh, how I have lived — ! "

He straightened his shoulders and ran his fingers through his hair. She had a sudden vision of what he might be if shorn of his poverty. There was something debonair — finished — an almost youthful grace — a hint of manner —

She sighed. " Oh, the waste of it! "

" Of what? "

She flamed. " Of you! "

Then she went in and shut the door.

He stood uncertainly in the hall. Then once again he faced the cold.

Around the corner was a shop where he would buy the red candle. The ten cents which he could

pay was to have gone for his breakfast. He had sacrificed his supper that he might not go hungry on Christmas morning. He had planned a brace of rolls and a bottle of milk. It had seemed to him that he could face a lean night with the promise of these.

There were no red candles in the shop. There were white ones, but a red candle was a red candle — with a special look of Christmas cheer. He would have no other.

The turn of a second corner brought him to the great square. Usually he avoided it. The blaze of gold on the west side was the club.

A row of motors lined the curb. There was Baxter's limousine and Fenton's French car. He knew them all. He remembered when his own French car had overshadowed Fenton's Ford.

There were wreaths to-night in the club windows, and when Sands opened the doors there was a mass of poinsettia against the hall mirror.

How warm it looked with all that gold and red!

In the basement was the grill. It was a night when one might order something heavy and hot. A planked steak — with deviled oysters at the start and a salad at the end.

And now another motor-car was poking its nose against the curb. And Whiting climbed out, a bear in a big fur coat.

Whiting's car was a closed one. And it would

stay there for an hour. Ostrander knew the habits of the man. From the office to the club and from the club — home. Whiting was methodical to a minute. At seven sharp the doors would open and let him out.

The clock on the post-office tower showed six!

There was a policeman on the east corner, beating his arms against the cold. Ostrander did not beat his arms. He cowered frozenly in the shadow of a big building until the policeman passed on.

Then he darted across the street and into Whiting's car!

Whiting, coming out in forty minutes, found his car gone. Sands, the door man, said that he had noticed nothing. The policeman on the corner had not noticed.

"I usually stay longer," Whiting said, "but tonight I wanted to get home. I have a lot of things for the kids."

"Were the things in your car?" the policeman asked.

"Yes. Toys and all that — "

Ostrander, with his hand on the wheel, his feet on the brakes, slipped through the crowded streets unchallenged. It had been easy to unlock the car. He had learned many things in these later years.

It was several minutes before he was aware of faint fragrances — warm tropical fragrances of

flowers and fruits and spices — Christmas fragrances which sent him back to the great kitchen where his grandmother's servants had baked and brewed.

He stopped the car and touched a button. The light showed booty. He had not expected this. He had wanted the car for an hour, to feel the thrill of it under his fingers, to taste again the luxury of its warmth and softness. He had meant to take it back unharmed — with nothing more than the restless ghost of his poor desires to haunt Whiting when again he entered it.

But now here were toys and things which Whiting, in a climax of generosity, had culled from bake-shop and grocer, from flower-shop, fruit-shop, and confectioner.

He snapped out the light and drove on. He had still a half-hour for his adventure.

It took just three of the thirty minutes to slide up to the curb in front of the tall tenement. He made three trips in and up to the top floor. He risked much, but fate was with him and he met no one.

Fate was with him, too, when he left the car at a corner near the club, and slipped out of it like a shadow, and thence like a shadow back to the shop whence his steps had tended before his adventures.

When he returned to the tall tenement the small family on the first floor had finished supper, and

the mother had gone back to work. The baby was asleep. Milly and Pussy, wrapped up to their ears, were hugging the waning warmth of the little stove.

"Mr. Tony, did you get the candle?" Pussy asked as he came in.

"Yes. But I've been thinking" — his manner was mysterious — "I don't want to put it on the shelf. I want it in the window — to shine out — "

"To shine out — why?"

"Well, you know, there's St. Nicholas."

"Oh — "

"He ought to come here, Pussy. Why shouldn't he come here? Why should he go up-town and up-town, and take all the things to children who have more than they want?"

Milly was philosophic. "St. Nicholas is fathers and mothers — "

But Pussy was not so sure. "Do you think he'd come — if we did? Do you really and truly think he would?"

"I think he might — "

The candle set in the window made a fine show from the street. They all went out to look at it. Coming in, they sat around the stove together.

Pussy drew her chair very close to Ostrander. She laid her hand on his knee. It was a little hand with short, fat fingers. In spite of lean living, Pussy had managed to keep fat. She was adorably dimpled.

Ostrander, looking down at the fat little hand, began: "Once upon a time — there was a doll — a Fluffy Ruffles doll, in a rosy gown — "

"Oh!" Pussy beat the small, fat hand upon his knee.

"And pink slippers — and it traveled miles to find some one to — love it. And at last it said to St. Nicholas, 'Oh, dear St. Nick, I want to find a little girl who hasn't any doll — ' "

"Like me?" said Pussy.

"Like you — "

"And St. Nicholas said, 'Will you keep your pink slippers clean and your nice pink frock clean if I give you to a poor little girl?' and the Fluffy Ruffles doll said 'Yes,' so St. Nicholas looked and looked for a poor little girl, and at last he came to a window — with a red candle — "

The fat little hand was still and Pussy was breathing hard.

"With a red candle, and there was a little girl who — didn't have any doll — "

Pussy threw herself on him bodily. "Is it true? Is it true?" she shrieked.

Milly, a little flushed and excited by the story, tried to say sedately: "Of course it isn't true. It couldn't be — true — "

"Let's wish it to be true — " Ostrander said, "all three of us, with our eyes shut — "

With this ceremony completed the little girls

were advised gravely to go to bed. "If Fluffy Ruffles and old St. Nick come by and find you up they won't stop — "

"Won't they? "

"Of course not. You must shut the door and creep under your quilt and cover up your head, and if you hear a noise you mustn't look."

Milly eyed him dubiously. "I think it is a shame to tell Pussy such — "

"Corking things? " He lifted her chin with a light finger and looked into her innocent eyes. "Oh, Milly, Milly, once upon a time there was a Princess, with eyes like yours, and she lived in a garden where black swans swam on a pool, and she wore pale-green gowns and there were poppies in the garden. And a Fool loved her. But she shut him out of the garden. He wasn't good enough even to kneel at her feet, so she shut him out and married a Prince with a white feather in his cap."

He had a chuckling sense of Whiting as the white-feathered prince. But Milly's eyes were clouded. "I don't like to think that she shut the poor Fool out of the garden."

For a moment he cupped her troubled face in his two hands. "You dear kiddie." Then as he turned away he found his own eyes wet.

As he started up-stairs Pussy peeped out at him.

"Wouldn't it be — corking — to see a Fluffy Ruffles doll — a-walking up the street?"

In a beautiful box up-stairs the Fluffy Ruffles doll stared at him. She was as lovely as a dream and as expensive as they make 'em. There was another doll in blue, also as expensive, also as lovely. Ostrander could see Milly with the blue doll matching her eyes.

There were toys, too, for the baby. And there was a bunch of violets. And boxes of candy. And books. And there were things to eat. Besides the fruits a great cake, and a basket of marmalades and jellies and gold-sealed bottles and meat pastes in china jars, and imported things in glass, and biscuits in tins.

Ostrander, after some consideration, opened the tin of biscuits and, munching, he wrote a note. Having no paper, he tore a wrapper from one of the boxes. He had the stub of a pencil, and the result was a scrawl.

"My Dear Whiting:

"It was I who borrowed your car — and who ran away with your junk. I am putting my address at the head of this, so that if you want it back you can come and get it. But perhaps you won't want it back.

"I have a feeling that to you and your wife I am as good as dead. If you have any thought of

me it is, I am sure, to pity me. Yet I rather fancy that you needn't. I am down and out, and living on ten dollars a month. That's all I got when the crash came — it is all I shall ever get. I pay four dollars a month for my room and twenty cents a day for food. Sometimes I pay less than twenty cents when I find myself in need of other — luxuries. Yet there's an adventure in it, Whiting. A good little woman who lives in this house begs me to work. But I have never worked. And why begin? I've a heritage of bad habits, and one does not wish to seem superior to one's ancestors.

" The winters are the worst. I spend the summers on the open road. Ask Marion if she remembers the days when we read Stevenson together in the garden? Tell her it is like that — under the stars — Tell her that I am getting more out of it than she is — with you —

" But the winters send me back to town — and this winter Fate has brought me to an old house in a shabby street just a bit back from the Club. On the first floor there is a little family. Three kiddies and a young mother who works to keep the wolf from the door. There's a Pussy-Kiddie, and a Milly-Kiddie, and a baby, and they have adopted me as a friend.

" And this Christmas I had nothing to give them — but a red candle to light their room.

" When I got into your car it was just for the

adventure. To breathe for a moment the air I once breathed — to fancy that Marion's ghost might sit beside me for one little moment, as she will sit beside you to the end of your days.

" I have played all rôles but that of robber — but when I saw the things that you had bought with Marion's money for Marion's children — it went to my head — and I wanted them in the worst way for those poor kiddies — who haven't any dolls or Christmas dinners.

" I am playing Santa Claus for them to-night. I shall take the things down and leave them in their poor rooms. It will be up to you to come and take them away. It will be up to you, too, to give this note to the police and steal my freedom.

" You used to be a good sport, Whiting. I have nothing against you except that you stole Marion — perhaps this will square our accounts. And if your children are, because of me, without their dolls to-morrow, you can remember this, that the kiddies are happy below stairs — since Dick Turpin dwells aloft!

" From among the rest I have chosen for myself a squat bottle, a box of biscuits, and a tin of the little imported sausages that you taught me to like.

" Well, my dear fellow, happy days! To-morrow morning I shall breakfast at your expense, unless you shall decide that I must breakfast behind bars.

" If you should come to-night, you will find in

the window a red candle shining. They have put it there to guide St. Nicholas and a certain Fluffy Ruffles doll!

"Ever yours,

"TONY."

He found an envelope, sealed, and addressed it. Then he went to work.

Four trips he made down the stairs. Four times he tiptoed into the shadowed room, where the long red candle burned. And when he turned to take a last look there on the table beside the tree stood the blue doll for Milly and the Fluffy Ruffles doll for Pussy and the rattles and rings and blocks for the baby, and on the chairs and the shelf above the tree were the other things — the great cake and the fruit and the big basket and the boxes of candy.

And for the little mother there were the violets and a note:

"The red candle winked at your window and brought me in. It is useless to search for me — for now and then a Prince passes and goes on. And he is none the less a Prince because you do not know him."

And now there was that other note to deliver. Out in the cold once more, he found the moon gone and the snow falling. As he passed the saint on the old church it seemed to smile down at him. The towers and gables were sheeted with white.

His footsteps made no sound on the padded streets.

He left the note at Whiting's door. He fancied that, as the footman held it open, he saw Marion shining on the stairs!

He was glad after that to get home and to bed, and to the warmth of his blanket. There was the warmth, too, of the wine.

In a little while he was asleep. On the table by his untidy bed was the box of biscuits and the bottle and the tin of tiny sausages.

If all went well be would feast like a lord on Christmas morning!

THE HOLLY HEDGE



THE HOLLY HEDGE

WHEN Billy and I lived in Virginia for a time, we began to look upon ancestors from an absolutely new angle. In New England we had never allowed them to dominate our lives. We were glad we had them but beyond that we thought very little about them. I had, indeed, always fancied that my *Mayflower* forebears were nice homey folk, and I could think of Priscilla and John Alden and of Miles Standish as simple and busy people like my father and mother and Billy and me.

But no one in Virginia had such ancestors — at least not in our particular county. Their grandfathers and grandmothers were all of royal blood; nobody had ever done a day's work and everybody had lived in great state and elegance until the Civil War, and since then they had lived on their memories.

It was a bit hard for us to get adjusted to their point of view. In our part of the country it had always counted as something rather dignified and fine to do your daily task and do it well, but we soon learned that down here the fact that you had

never toiled or spun seemed to prove your kinship to kings and queens and to put you on a pedestal.

Yet I had to confess that their somewhat exaggerated ideals resulted in a charm of manner and a grace of speech which are lacking in less exalted circles.

"YOU see, Billy," I said to my husband, the first time that we met Carter Branchwaite, "if you feel that your grandfather was a prince of royal blood, it gives you an air."

"A princely air is all right," was Billy's practical response, "if only there's something back of it. I believe that a man ought to live up to his ancestors in more than manner."

"Doesn't Carter Branchwaite live up to his?"

"No. They tell me in town that he is too proud to work, and he owes everybody."

"How does he live?"

"Oh, his wife keeps summer boarders and sends things in winter to the Women's Exchange."

I had never seen Carter Branchwaite's wife, but in spite of what Billy said about Carter, I felt that she must be a happy woman. The first time that he came into our store, with his hat in his hand, I was charmed with him. He was tall and dark,

and he wore faded corduroy, and when he spoke to the negroes about the door, they jumped to serve him.

He bought a lot of little things and charged them.

"And much good may it do me," said Billy, when we went up-stairs together. "He'll never pay this bill."

The next time we saw him, he was riding over the top of the hill toward us, just at the edge of a November evening.

It had snowed a little the night before, and the world was gray-white, with the cedars on top of the hill sticking their black spires into a band of golden sky, with the storm-clouds above it. There was not a soul in sight but Carter on his horse, with his great cloak catching the wind and spreading out on each side of him like wings.

As he passed us and swept off his hat, a thrill went through me — such a thrill as I used to feel when I read "Kidnapped" and followed the fortunes of Alan Breck.

"He is too romantic to be true," I said to Billy. "Think of wearing a cloak like that in the twentieth century!"

"He doesn't know that it is the twentieth century," Billy said, "and that isn't an old cloak. It is cut from the pattern of one that his grandfather wore. I wonder if he has paid the tailor?"

I THOUGHT Billy was rather hard on him, but I didn't say anything, for we were riding in our little new car, and I had Junior on my lap, and the next day would be Thanksgiving, and it seemed as if nothing in the whole wide world could make me unthankful or at odds with Billy, so I just laid my hand on his knee, and presently he took his hand from the wheel and laid it for a moment on mine and said: "'All that glitters is not gold,' Lady Love, but perhaps Branchwaite has more in him than I have been led to believe."

The glow had gone from the western sky. We came to a broad river with a thin film of ice veiling its red waters. We crossed a covered bridge and rode into a spectral village. Once upon a time the village had been a thriving town, and ships with rich cargos had sailed up the wide stream; then the railroad, six miles away, had stolen from the river its birthright of commerce, and gradually the town had died, and now in the stormy twilight its ghosts confronted us — there were decayed warehouses, skeleton chimneys, an old watermill whose wheels were still.

Billy spoke of the mill: "I wish some one had the energy to open it up. There is corn in this country to be ground, and people everywhere are asking for the sweet old meal. Kitten, if I weren't

a storekeeper, I'd be a miller and you should be the miller-ess."

I shivered. "I shouldn't like to live in a town that was dead. And I should be afraid of the river, and that Junior would fall in."

THE next day Damaris Branchwaite came into the store and bought a lot of things and paid for them, and she paid, too, for the things that her husband had bought and charged.

"I told her that she need not," Billy said when he came up to lunch, "that I was in no hurry. But she insisted. She bought groceries in small quantities, and she asked me to speak to any one who might come in to inquire about a place to board. She has people all summer, but in the fall and winter there are only a few transients."

"Is she pretty, Billy?"

"I think if she had better clothes she'd be rather stunning," Billy decided, and I agreed with him when I saw her. I waited on her one morning when Billy was out. Susan Bagley was up-stairs with Junior. Susan is big and brown and young, but she has nice old-fashioned ways. After Junior came, I found that I didn't have time to cook and

sew and tend baby and help Billy with the store, so we hired Susan, and she proved to be an angel in ebony.

So that morning, with my mind at ease about my baby, I was selling molasses and hominy to a long and lanky youth from up in the hills when Damaris Branchwaite came in.

She told me who she was, and asked if we could put some holly wreaths on sale for Christmas. She thought that the people who motored by might want to buy them.

"We have an old holly hedge at Bleak Hill," she explained. "In my grandfather's time it was five feet wide and nine feet high, and all the world came to see it. It isn't as wonderful as that now, but it is well worth seeing."

I TOLD her we should be very glad to display the wreaths in the windows and that we should want some ourselves. "You see, it is Junior's first Christmas, and we are going to have a tree."

She was very interested and asked to see the baby, so Susan Bagley brought him down, all lovely after his bath and wrapped in a red blanket, so that he shouldn't take cold in the drafty store.

Susan knew her, of course. The people down

here are all like one big family. Black and white are linked together by ties which have to do with generations of service.

"Miss Damaris," Susan said, "he's as fat as a hawg. Ef it wasn' so kole, I'd unwrop his laigs and sho yo'."

Mrs. Branchwaite smiled. "He's a lovely baby. Will you let me hold him, Susan?"

It was while she stood there with Junior in her arms that I realized what a beauty she must have been once upon a time.

It couldn't have been so long ago, either. For she wasn't old. But she had a careworn look and her shoulders sagged and her clothes were cheap and shabby.

But Junior's red blanket gave color to her face, and I had a feeling that I should like to see her in a red velvet cloak with a wide fur collar and a hat with a plume.

She had an old setter dog with her, and he stood looking up at the baby and wagging his tail and whining the soft whine of a dog in ecstasy.

"You like the baby, don't you, old Dreams?" she asked. "Shall we carry him home with us?"

Old Dreams wiggled and moaned. "What a dear of a dog," I said, "and what a funny name."

"Dreams? I called him that when he was a puppy. There have always been Dreams in the kennels at Bleak Hill."

After she had gone, Susan told me about her; that she had been a belle and a beauty before she married Carter Branchwaite. Bleak Hill belonged to her. Branchwaite had come there to live when he married her, but neither of them had any money.

He still owned the remains of his father's estate and he rode over the land and raised a few crops, but couldn't make enough to pay for the negro labor.

"Why doesn't he find something to do?" I asked.

Susan looked at me reproachfully. "Whut cud you axpec' him to do, Miss Kittie?" she demanded. "He's a gempmum."

It was a few days later that the big snow came —such a snow as one rarely sees in the Virginia hills — piling up in drifts, driving the birds to our door to be fed, turning Susan's warm brown tints to a sort of ashy gray.

"It jes' eats into the marrer of my bones," she confided as she heaped wood on the fireplace. "I'm going to set in the kitchen this day and cook sumpin' good and hot."

But Billy and I loved the still white cold to which we had been born and bred. Not many people came into the store, so we played like children out-of-doors, while Susan, with Junior in her arms, watched us from the window of her warm kitchen with wondering eyes.

And it was while Billy and I were snow-balling each other within an inch of our lives that a long gray motor-car stopped at the door. In it were six women, who piled out and rushed into the store and gathered about the round hot stove. Billy and I followed them in, and found that they had motored down from Richmond, making speeches along the way, and that they were urging all the women to get out and vote at the next election — and that their candidate was a man who was firm for prohibition.

THE women themselves were the kind that didn't exist in my grandmother's time or in yours. In those days there might have been fine and strong-minded women, but they were not fine and strong-minded and fashionable. They had come into our store for sardines and crackers and to get warm. They were famished and frozen. The snow had stopped them along the way. They wanted to find a lodging for the night. They asked us to take them in, but we hadn't room, and it was then that I thought of Damaris Branchwaite.

"She asked us to recommend people," I said, "and it isn't far."

So they warmed themselves while we telephoned

to Mrs. Branchwaite. Carter Branchwaite answered the phone, and when Billy asked him, he hesitated, and then at last he said that they would be glad to put them up as guests for the night.

Billy and I rode over with them to show them the way and to take some things that Mrs. Branchwaite had ordered. And it was when we turned in at the gate that we saw the holly hedge. It outlined what had evidently been an old colonial garden. It was not trimmed or confined in the formal fashion that it had once followed, and so it spread itself out, like a gorgeous green serpent against the white expanse of snow.

The women in the car went crazy over it, and when Carter Branchwaite stood on the porch of the old house to welcome them, with a blood-red sunset back of him, I felt again the thrill of his romantic presence.

He had thrown his great cloak about him and his head was bare. As he stood there tall and straight, he was like a young prince, and I heard the women speak of it. "A gentleman of the old school," said one of them.

He stepped down to meet them and helped them out, and he bowed — with a thousand miles of social distance between us — to Billy and me. Then we drove around to the kitchen door to deliver the groceries!

In the kitchen Damaris Branchwaite, in a big

apron, was helping her old black cook to hurry dinner. Under the big apron I caught a glimpse of an out-of-date dinner-gown. Now that she was without her hat, I could see her beautiful hair — black, with a touch of gray, thick and soft and high on her head.

"I shall have to give them just ham and eggs," she said, "but Becky makes such good hot biscuits," her smile warmed the old negress, "and I have peach preserves and cottage-cheese — we'll call it supper, Becky."



AS she moved quickly about the room, there was high-bred grace in every line. If her husband had the air of a prince, surely here was the princess.

"It was so good of you to bring them here," she said, when I told her something of her guests and their mission, "but how queer it seems to think of women doing a thing like that!"

As Billy and I rode home together, there was a little new moon just ahead of us, and the white hills rising all around, and I said to him: "In just ten days it will be Christmas, and it is going to be different from every other Christmas."

"In what way, Kitten?"

"Oh, having my own baby makes me know what — that wonderful baby meant — to the world."

And Billy nodded, and said soberly: "Life seems like a bigger thing, doesn't it, Lady Love," and after that we didn't say another word, we just looked at the little moon and the white hills and knew what was in each other's hearts.

And when we came at last to our little home in those upper rooms there was our good black Susan in front of a blazing fire, with Junior on her knee, and with our old cat, Tid, blinking on the hearth, and I said to Billy, "Is there anything in the whole wide world quite so nice as a home?" and Billy looked down at me and said, "Nothing — when you are in it, Lady Love."

The Richmond women stayed three days with Damaris Branchwaite, and on the fourth she brought some holly wreaths to the store.

I had never seen lovelier ones, and I said so.

"We think our Bleak holly is very fine," she said, "and I'll have to confess that I hate to cut it. It is like injuring something alive. It was one of the reasons why my father would never sell the place. He was afraid some one might let the hedge die, or destroy it, and he couldn't stand that. And I feel as he did. The holly hedge is a part of me, like the old portraits and the family silver."

She brought, too, some handbills, which the

women from Richmond wished to have distributed. They were to come back on the following Thursday and speak in an abandoned old church at the Cross-roads. The handbills gave the subjects which they would discuss.

"Shall you go?" I asked.

She hesitated. "I want to hear what they have to say, but my husband isn't willing. He doesn't like them."

"Why not?"

Again she seemed to hesitate. "At first he did. They are so beautiful in a big strong way — especially that young goddess with the golden hair. But they talked of the trip they are making and Mr. Branchwaite doesn't believe in it — he thinks that men should manage such things — and he said so, — and they laughed at him."

I had a vision of that proud young prince, facing the laughter of those splendid Amazons.

"And of course he was very angry. He doesn't want them to come back to the home and he doesn't want me to hear them speak."

She began to draw on her gloves over her thin white fingers "Would you do a thing — if your husband didn't want you to?" she asked suddenly, and flushed vividly.

"I don't believe that Billy would say that I shouldn't."

"Yes, but if he did?"

"A woman belongs first — to herself."

Our eyes met and she drew a long breath. "It opens a new world, doesn't it to — us women." Then she seemed to shelve the subject. "The next time I come I shall bring a tree for your Junior. And more wreaths for you."

She went away with her old Dreams at her heels, and when Billy came in I told him about it.

"Billy," I said, when I finished, "would it be right for me to go anywhere, if you didn't want me to go?"

Billy was cutting cheese to send out with an order. There was no one in the store. He laid down his knife and leaned on the counter.

"I don't own your soul, Lady Love," he said.

And in spite of the cheese and his white apron, I felt way down in my heart that never before had Billy seemed quite so much a — man!

The abandoned old church at the Crossroads was built years ago by a rich Westerner who came down and bought a great old estate and expected to live like an English lord. But he grew tired of the experiment and sold his place, and the little church, having no endowment and no congregation, stands there in mute protest against the indifference of the community which can find no spiritual use for it. It has stained-glass windows and mahogany pews, and when on the Thursday morning it was packed with people curious to hear the

words of the wonderful women who had come in the gray motor-car I wondered why it was that such a congregation couldn't fill it every Sunday.



DAMARIS BRANCHWAITE was there. She sat right under the windows and the sunlight streamed through and seemed to wrap her in royal colors, red and purple and blue. Billy and I were there, in the back of the church, for he had to leave early on account of Junior. Susan was watching the store for us, and we knew that after the meeting there would be lots of our customers stopping to buy.

I have never heard such speeches and perhaps I never shall again. I sometimes think that one's mood must match the speaker's eloquence, and that very morning Billy and I had made our first payment on the new cottage in which we were to live in the spring. Things had prospered with us and our Christmas present to each other was to be the precious little house. So when that golden-haired goddess spoke of a woman standing shoulder to shoulder with her husband, sharing sunshine and storm, voting with him for all that was big and beautiful, I had the feeling that the days I had

stood in the store and had sold bacon and beans over the counter had had a meaning — and the meaning was sharing the storms, and the sunshine was the house for which we had paid with our labor.

We left early and drove home as fast as we could. On the way we met Carter Branchwaite. He was riding like the wind, with his great cloak spreading out behind him. He halted when he saw us, and Billy stopped our car.

"Have you been to the meeting?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is my wife there?"

And of course we had to say "Yes" again.

He turned his horse like a flash and galloped toward home. We could hear the beat of hoofs on the frozen ground, fainter and fainter, until we started our machine.

Well, you could never have imagined in modern times anything more dramatic. I told Billy that I felt as if we had been held up by a bandit — one of the gentlemanly kind, like Robin Hood, who steals your purse with a gallant air and is off hot-footed to the next adventure.

We came again to the river and the covered bridge and the dead town. Even in the broad daylight the old warehouses and the old mill looked bleak and forbidding. There were buzzards above the trees, and the trees were willows in a tangle of bare branches over the ice.

I spoke of it to Billy. "Susan says it's haunted."

"I'll bring you here in the spring," Billy told me, "when the willows shade the river, and the old mill is covered with trumpet vines and Virginia creeper, and the birds are nesting in the trees — "

"I don't ever want to come," I declared, "except when we have to drive through, and then I am always glad to leave it all behind."

Damaris Branchwaite rode by later with all of those splendid women. They left her at the store and went away to the next town, and that was the last of them. But somehow I shall always think of them as angel visitants.

Well, I asked Mrs. Branchwaite to come upstairs and talk over the meeting. She had an air of recklessness about her and her cheeks were scarlet.

"Wasn't it the most inspiring atmosphere?" she asked, as we sat down by the fire. "I felt as if I were swimming in a sea of light — with no body or mind — just soul.

"I lead a rather lonely life," she went on, "in spite of the fact that I know nearly everybody in the county. Distances are so great and the roads are bad in the winter, and in the summer I am so busy that I haven't much time to get acquainted with my boarders. But I have a great deal of time to think and it seemed to me this morning that

some of the things I have been thinking were voiced by those women — and made plain."

I said presently that I had been lonely at first, until I had made one or two friends who didn't care if I did live over the store.

Her glance traveled around my cosy living-room and came back to me. "Do you know," she said, "that this little home of yours seems perfect to me, after my great barn of a house?"

"Really?"

"Really. Sometimes I feel that grandeur separates people, and when it is grandeur plus poverty — it is as chilly as Greenland. My husband insists that the old splendors are important — that to be content with anything less is a step downward. But I am not sure."

When she went away, I said to Billy, "I was half afraid to have her go."

"Why, sweetheart?"

"Billy, there was something about his face as he turned away. And you see he didn't want her to go to the meeting."

Billy kissed me. "Don't you worry, Lady Love. The worst that he can do is to get a bit fussed about it."

But that was not the worst!

The next day was Friday and Christmas was just a week away. It was crisp and clear, and I stood at the window of one of our upper rooms

looking down at Billy who was feeding the birds. He had nailed a great piece of suet to a tree and the blue jays and woodpeckers were jabbing their sharp bills into it. All the little birds were at Billy's feet — the cardinals and jays made great spots of color.

Then all at once, beyond the birds, my eyes were caught by the sight of a slow-moving vehicle far up the road. An old negro was driving and a woman sat beside him, and as they came closer I saw that the woman was Damaris Branchwaite. Her steeds were two plodding old farm horses and the load that they carried was holly — holly heaped high, with the berries dripping from it to the road like drops of blood.

SHE drove straight past the store toward the railroad station, and when she nodded to Billy, she hardly seemed to see him. Her face was set in frozen lines like the face of a dead woman.

Then Susan Bagley, who stood beside me with Junior in her arms, gave a great gasping sob.

"My Gawd, Miss Kittie, hit's her holly haidge!"

"Her holly hedge — Susan!"

"He cut it down — Henry Jackson told me this mawnin'."

"Who cut it down?"

"Carter Branchwaite. He got Henry and three other niggers yistiddy when she was at the Prohibition meetin'—and Henry says that when she got there, she ran up to Mistah Branchwaite, and shook his arm, and said, 'You mus'n,' and he jes' wropped his cloak aroun' him and looked down at her and said, 'Who's the marster?' an' she jes' went into the house an' shet de do'."

Well, all that day Damaris Branchwaite came driving down with her holly, and Billy heard from the negroes that she was shipping it to Richmond. We learned afterward that she had telephoned to the women who had stopped with her and that they had told her they could use all she would send as they were decorating one of the theatres for a great Christmas rally.

If you have ever watched a dreary winter funeral, with the carriages dragging through the snow, you will know how I felt that day as I watched Damaris Branchwaite

Just at dusk the last load was delivered, and as they came back from the station Mrs. Branchwaite stopped at the store and Henry Jackson waited. She asked Billy if she might see me and he sent her up-stairs. Susan and the baby and I were in front of the fire in a little circle of light and all the rest of the room was dark. I shall never forget how Mrs. Branchwaite looked, standing in the

door, with her face like a blurred white blot against the blackness behind her.

I rose at once and brought her to the fire. She sat down, but she didn't even glance at Susan or the baby, she just said in a dry hard voice, "May I stay for the night," and I said, "Indeed, you may, and Susan shall put you right to bed."

Then she looked at Susan, and said, "Go down and tell Henry Jackson that he can take the horses home."

So Susan went, and Damaris Branchwaite turned to me and said: "He cut down my holly hedge to — punish me. I don't want to talk about it — please. But — I am not going back to him. Those women in Richmond will find work for me in the city, and the money that I get for my holly will pay my fare."

She was tired and wet and worn, but she did not weep a tear. She just stood there saying, "I shall never go back."

Then Susan came up and we put fresh sheets on the bed in my warm little spare room, and heated the water for her bath, and presently we had her in one of my fine embroidered trousseau nightgowns, and when Susan brought her a hot drink I turned the light low and left her alone.

And then I went down to Billy. "Oh, Billy," I said, "what are we going to do about it?"

And Billy said: "I don't think I'd worry, Lady

Love. Things will just have to work themselves out."

Well, they did work out. But not at once. It seems that Carter Branchwaite had gone straight to Richmond after he had cut down the hedge, and he did not come back until Christmas Eve.

By that time his wife was hot with fever and hoarse with bronchitis, and of course she couldn't go to Richmond as she had planned.

THE store was open late on the night before Christmas, and when at last Billy came up we trimmed Junior's little tree and then Billy was so tired that he rolled into bed and was asleep before he could say Jack Robinson.

But I sat up to give Damaris Branchwaite her medicine until Susan took my place.

I was finishing a little cap for Mrs. Branchwaite. I wanted her to have something on the tree and so I had hunted up some scraps of swiss and some blue ribbon and I was very busy making the bows when I remembered that Billy hadn't brought up the yeast for Susan's rolls, so I went to get it.

As I came into the store I had a lamp in my

hand and I could see old Tid blinking at me from his warm rug in front of the fire and the moonlight streaming in through the little pane set in the front door, making a patch of silver on the floor.

There are people who can't see anything but ugliness and sordidness in a little country store. But I have never felt that way about ours. There is something almost picturesque in the bright colors and the neat shelves.

It seemed to me as I set my lamp down on the counter that I was in some way more keenly aware than ever of what a snug little place it was — perhaps having Damaris Branchwaite on my mind, I felt the contrast between her great old house on Bleak Hill and this home of mine and Billy's.

Well, I got the yeast and was starting upstairs, when I heard a tap at the front door. I stopped and looked back. A voice said, "Will you let me in?" I went close to the door and asked, "Who is it?" and the voice said, "Carter Branchwaite."

At that my heart absolutely ceased to beat. I felt that to open the door would be like letting a robber in — not an every-day robber in commonplace clothes, but a Dick Turpin, with his cloak flying behind him.

But I let him in. "I am sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I came home from Richmond an hour ago. Henry Jackson says that my wife is here."

I set down my lamp. I was shaking all over. "Yes, she is here," was all I said.

"I have come to take her home," he said.

I could feel my back stiffen. "She won't go," I told him.

"I don't think we need discuss that. May I see her?"

And it was then that I said, "She is never going back."

"Why not?"

"Because she owns — her soul."

He started as if he had been stung. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean this," I said, "that no woman will stand being bossed by a man she doesn't respect."

I flung the words down like a gauntlet before him, and his face flamed.

"Who taught you that?" he asked, and came a little closer. "Those Amazons from Richmond?"

Well, I never wanted Billy as I wanted him at that moment. I stood with my back to the counter, facing a man who looked like a god and who had the temper of a devil. But I was not afraid. I was swept above and beyond fear by my anger.

"No," I said, and my eyes met his steadily. "Those women did not teach me. My husband taught me. I respect him because he works for me

and pays my bills and takes care of me. That's what a husband is for — to stand between a woman and the world. And you have let your wife work for you and pay your bills. And you hated those women because they laughed at you and told you the truth, and so you cut down her holly hedge.

"It was a cruel thing to do," I went on, "and a small thing and a mean thing — and it was not a gentlemanly thing — "

His hand went up and stopped me. "A Branchwaite came over to England with William the Conqueror."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"They have always been gentlemen."

"They haven't, and you know it. Some of those old barons were brutes and beasts — and their wives were slaves. But your wife will never be a slave. She is too fine and brave."

Then he said again. "We won't discuss her. Will you tell her that I am here?"

"She is ill — and she mustn't be disturbed."

"Ill?"

I nodded. I was having a hard time to keep from crying. And I knew that it was not the time to cry. So I managed to say, "Please go away and come back in the morning."

"Can I see her then?"

"I am not sure. But you can talk to Billy."

I felt sure that if any one could work things out it would be Billy. He doesn't get mad and he doesn't cry. Billy wanted to be a lawyer and he has a judicial mind. But he has more than that — he has a lovely soul.

Well, Carter Branchwaite stood there uncertain, with his face all dark and clouded, and suddenly I felt sorry for him as a mother might feel for her bad little boy who is getting things wrong, so I just blurted out, "I wish I had said kinder things to you."

He gave a hard short laugh. "Maybe I deserved it."

"But it is Christmas Day. One ought to be kind on Christmas."

He had turned away, and opened the door, but he turned back. "You told the truth. Perhaps I ought to thank you for that."

He was a proud young prince and he said it grudgingly. Then he was gone.

When I went to bolt the door, I could see him riding away in the moonlight, his cloak billowing out behind him like the wings of some ominous bird. It was one o'clock — and Christmas morning.



As I ran up-stairs, I met Billy coming down. He wore pink-striped pajamas and felt slippers. He had heard Carter Branchwaite ride away and had found me gone.

Well, you may never have heard of a Christmas angel in pink-striped pajamas and felt slippers, but that was the way that Billy looked to me. He was short and plump and his hair stood on end, but I just fell into his arms and said, "A merry Christmas, Lover."

And when we had talked it out in front of the fire, Billy said, "Sweetheart, you are the most wonderful woman in the whole wide world," and I said, "And you are the most wonderful man," and we both laughed, but our eyes were wet.

Well, the next morning Carter Branchwaite did not come. He sent Henry Jackson down to ask about his wife and I sent word back that she was better.

We had a quiet Christmas with a tree for Junior and a turkey, although the doctor said that our guest was out of danger.

Every day Henry Jackson came down to ask about Mrs. Branchwaite, but her husband stayed away. And when Damaris was better I told her of that Christmas morning and of what I had said to him. She looked at me with her big eyes, and at last she said, "Nothing can make any difference

now. I shall go to Richmond as soon as I am well."

And as soon as she was well she went, and we had a letter from her now and then. She was working hard and finding life very different. But she missed the hills of home.

I think, too, that she missed her husband. For she loved him. And once she asked me in a letter, "Is he well, and what is he doing?"

No one seemed to know what he was doing, and so the winter passed and the spring came, and the ice went from the river; and one day Billy and I drove across the covered bridge to the dead town with its skeleton houses.

But now there were no skeletons, for the vines had thrown over them a thin veil of green, and there were old apple-trees and old lilac-bushes, and the willows along the river waved like silver plumes in the soft sweet air.

An old negro was at work cleaning up the place and he spoke to us. And Billy stopped the car and said, "Why, Henry Jackson, what are you doing here?"

And Henry laughed and said, "You ax him — " and there in the door was Carter Branchwaite!

He came straight out to our car and stood beside it and said to Billy, "Will you sell all the corn that is ground?" And Billy said, "By Jove, are you going to start the mill?" and he said,

"Yes, in the old days there was a Branchwaite who was a miller."

Well, he made it pay. And his wife came back to him. And she came proudly and cried on his shoulder when she heard the water rushing over the wheel and saw the birds nesting in the vines and the home that he had prepared for her. For they live over the mill. He sold his old place and shut up hers.

Damaris Branchwaite is a happy woman. Some day, she says, they may go back to their big old house on Bleak Hill. But her husband tells her that they will not go until the holly hedge is grown. And he, too, has found happiness in the old mill. He is king of his domain and he knows the joy of the day's work. And he loves and is loved. And that, as Billy says, is the best of all!